

filmcomment

CANNES: OUR CRITICS PICK
THE FILMS THAT WILL ENDURE

WARREN OATES AND THE DEATH
OF THE WORKING-CLASS ACTOR

FORGOTTEN AFRICAN-AMERICAN
ACTORS OF THE SILENT ERA

JULY/AUGUST 2016 | PUBLISHED BY THE FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER | VOLUME 52/NUMBER 4

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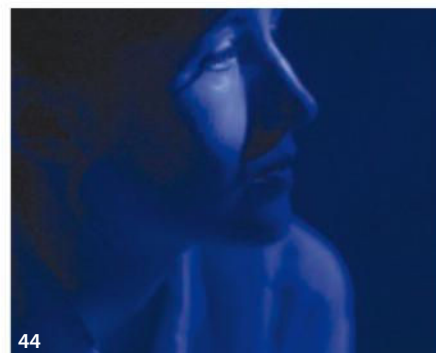
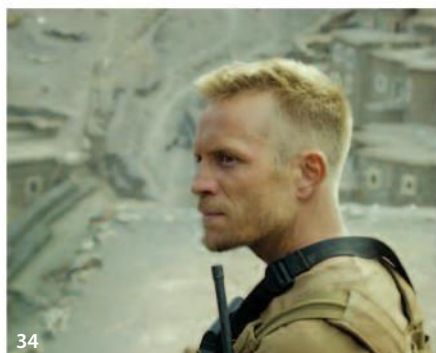
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Cover: Kristen Stewart in *Personal Shopper*. Photo courtesy of CG Cinema/IFC Films



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"MY WHOLE THING IS HOW TO close the distance between you and an audience, and you and a character. I just think people are a little uptight and weird about that." That's Kristen Stewart explaining (and perhaps epitomizing) her acting



approach to an interviewer at Cannes last year while promoting *Clouds of Sils Maria*. Her casual immediacy and cool understatement has developed beyond a deconstruction of her star power into an ever-evolving technique of unheralded emotional nuance. This year, Stewart returned to Cannes in not one but two films—an even closer collaboration with Olivier Assayas, *Personal Shopper*, in which she's on screen for nearly the entire film, and Woody Allen's *Café Society*—and earlier, at Sundance, she starred in the climactic story of Kelly Reichardt's triptych *Certain Women*.

With the Allen movie opening in July, the same day as a *fourth* Stewart-starring film, the dystopian romance *Equals*, and with IFC Films/Sundance Selects distributing both *Certain Women* and what you might call Kristen Stewart's *Personal Shopper*, it's high time to recognize a moment, and a major actor.

Behold, then, our cover story, an appreciation of the 26-year-old Stewart's talents, across the spectrum of her career, which is still in the process of revealing itself. It's not a profile—the world has been awash in K-Stew since the *Twilight* juggernaut first gave rise to social media armies and personal shrines—but rather an essay, a consideration in full, courtesy of critic and scholar Nick Davis, who interviewed Todd Haynes for our November/December 2015 issue. Davis's analysis of Stewart's particular talents kicks off an issue featuring two other in-depth looks at (other) acting phenomena—overlooked black performers of the silent era and the disappearance of the working-class American male actor—and an array of features.

Our vision of the summer movie season, as usual, expands to include Cannes, covered at length by four writers, myself included, but we also feature a glimpse of more traditional dog-days fare in Steven Spielberg's latest, *The BFG*. Spielberg's film is reviewed by the most recent addition to the bustling FILM COMMENT family, Michael Koresky, the new Editorial Director of the Film Society of Lincoln Center. You may remember his feature on pre-Stonewall queer cinema from our March/April issue. Having worked with Michael before and admired him as an editor and as a critic for over a decade now, I, along with the rest of the magazine's staff, couldn't be happier.

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OPENING SHOTS

OUTSIDE MAN

Alice Rohrwacher will complete her third feature-length screenplay this fall in New York as the Film Society of Lincoln Center's 2016 Filmmaker in Residence. Following the Cannes Grand Prix-winning *The Wonders*, *My Bitter Land* concerns "a man living on the margins of society" who engages in time travel. Whether that idea will be expressed in terms of outright science-fiction or not is unclear, but Rohrwacher's tonally diverse and movingly perceptive body of work thus far promises a fresh approach.



HOT PROPERTY | Dogs

Death Tax

"I'M AFRAID OF GOD. BUT HE'S AFRAID OF ME, TOO." It's a good line—maybe a bit too good—but that's characteristic of this Romanian slow-burner's polished pulp. *Dogs*, which premiered at Cannes in *Un Certain Regard*, is above all an impressively assured and expertly assembled feature debut from commercial director and novelist Bogdan Mirica. His tale of a man claiming a huge inherited country estate and finding deep-rooted corruption takes its cues from American return-of-the-repressed backwater thrillers, rather than from the long-take house style of his award-winning countrymen.

Broad-shouldered city boy Roman (Dragos Bucur) wants to sell off his grandfather's sprawl of grassy land and brush, right on the border with Ukraine. But the caginess of the caretaker he meets is merely an aperitif to the area's casually vicious morass of nefarious intentions and brutality—it's all run as a criminal fiefdom by shadowy capo Samir (Vlad Ivanov), who utters the aforementioned line. After Grandpa's death, Samir and his cronies were hoping to expand their stranglehold on the property which doubled as a lawless dumping ground for bodies. But Roman—spurred on by the surprise visit of his utterly out-of-place girlfriend (Raluca Aprodu)—digs in, driven by a mix of naïve righteousness and threatened masculinity.

It's yet another angle on the traumatized Romanian obsession with Communism's legacy: something's always bubbling up to the surface, as in the swampy opening shot. What Mirica and his unsavory characters capture is the sense of the resulting moral, historical, and geographical no-man's-land—and the deadly rules beneath the rules.—*Nicolas Rapold*
Sales Agent: BAC Films

SHORT ENDS While the rest of us at Cannes were busy watching films, some people were making new ones: **Isabelle Huppert** (in town for Competition title *Elle*) was spotted filming with director **Hong Sangsoo**. The two last worked together on *In Another Country* in 2012. No word yet on how the sun-drenched backdrop will be incorporated into the story ... **Arnaud Desplechin's** next film *Ismael's Ghosts* concerns a filmmaker whose former lover comes back from the dead. Led by **Mathieu Amalric**, the stellar cast also includes **Charlotte Gainsbourg**, **Marion Cotillard**, and **Louis Garrel** ...



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NEW LOOK

Paul Thomas Anderson is said to be working on a film about a fashion designer, set in 1950s New York. He's busily writing the screenplay, while Daniel Day-Lewis is in talks to star in the film, which is bankrolled by contemporary auteurism's angel investor Annapurna Pictures. Some say the designer is Charles James; the rest of us are content to wait and see what emerges from the minds of PTA-DDL.



ABSOLUTELY FABULIST

Director of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* Marielle Heller casts her eyes back once again to 1970s America with an adaptation of notorious forger Lee Israel's memoir *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*. The dark comedy will star Melissa McCarthy as Israel, who fabricated correspondences with deceased writers and actors such as Dorothy Parker and Noël Coward. The Fox Searchlight project was originally slated for director Nicole Holofcener—who also wrote the script—and star Julianne Moore. For Heller, the project will come after the “fantasy romance drama” *Kolma* starring Daisy Ridley and produced by J.J. Abrams, and *The Case Against 8*, an adaptation of the 2014 documentary about California's anti-gay-marriage Proposition 8.

DIRECTIONS | Maren Ade on *Toni Erdmann*

Blessings in Disguise

What was the biggest new thing you were trying to do as a filmmaker, with this story about a corporate consultant, Ines, and her prankish visiting father?

Playing a bit with genre to make a comedy. But it turned out that I need some drama—I can never just do a comedy. I found this character of the father—his role-playing, his transformation—and that opened a door out of realism. There is a larger-than-life thing to it, different from my previous film [*Everyone Else*]. I enjoyed it because of the feeling that I can now do surprising cinematic moments.

Posing as the life coach “Toni Erdmann,” Ines's father creates situations that help her reevaluate her life. But the movie shifts...

She takes it over. And she is also letting him, as Toni, into her life, showing him a part of her world. I don't want characters to have to learn anything—but they do get to know each other better.

Its portrait of corporate life is remarkably apt and detailed.

I was very critical of the corporate world when I started the research. But I found

out, like with any enemy, when you come closer the picture dissolves. One guy said to me: “You're an artist. You're allowed to think like that. This is your job. My job, I cannot think like that.”

In staging scenes, how do you preserve the energy and spontaneity?

I try to leave the actors a lot of freedom. I first try to rehearse on location, stage everything very well beforehand, and leave the emotional part for shooting. We also decide what to do with the camera. We wanted to keep it very simple, so it was always handheld. We had just one lens, but still it shouldn't feel too

much like a documentary. It was not as easy as it seems. It seems very natural.

How did it feel to have your film premiere at Cannes to such great critical acclaim?

I finished five days before the festival: on Monday [before the Friday premiere for press], I was still mixing. I'm used to the idea that not everyone will like it, and that's okay. But now I'm very happy that everyone can take the film as their own.—*Nicolas Rapold*



THE LAST 10 FILMS I'VE SEEN

KIRSTEN JOHNSON DIRECTOR (*Cameraperson*)

1. *The Journey from Syria* Matthew Cassel, 2016
2. *Space Jam* Joe Pytko, 1996
3. *Zidane: A 21st Century Portrait* Douglas Gordon & Philippe Parreno, 2006
4. *Risk* Laura Poitras, 2016
5. *Gimme Danger* Jim Jarmusch, 2016
6. *A Thousand Suns* Mati Diop, 2013
7. *Eva Hesse* Marcie Begleiter, 2016
8. *The Fits* Anna Rose Holmer, 2015
9. *Syl Johnson: Any Way the Wind Blows* Rob Hatch-Miller, 2015
10. *Whose Country?* Mohamed Siam, 2016



Terence Davies plans to shoot an adaptation of Richard McCann's novel *Mother of Sorrows*, about two adolescent brothers growing up gay in suburban Maryland. The freshly prolific Davies (*Sunset Song*, *A Quiet Passion*) has also been commissioned to direct a film about English poet and soldier Siegfried Sassoon for release in 2018, to mark the anniversary of the end of World War I ... In August, Sarah Polley will begin work on *Alias Grace*, a six-hour miniseries based on the 1997 novel by Margaret Atwood about the murders of a wealthy farmer and his housekeeper in 19th-century Ontario ...

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BODY COUNT

Lars von Trier's follow-up to *Nymphomaniac* will start shooting in August. Set in Detroit, *The House That Jack Built* is a psychological horror tale following the grisly exploits of a serial killer. The film adopts the murderer's point of view and was initially intended as a project for television. Like *Nymphomaniac*, it will feature an international ensemble cast and will be told in nonlinear fashion. Von Trier announced the film on his Facebook page earlier in the year, after apparently abandoning his years-long vow of public silence.



PROFILE IN COURAGE

The director of single-take favorite *Victoria*, Sebastian Schipper, will have his next feature produced by Darren Aronofsky's Protozoa Pictures. *Undeniable* is based on the memoir by American terrorism expert Jessica Stern, *Denial*, reflecting upon her rape as a teenager in her family's Massachusetts home and how she coped. The plot of Schipper's adaptation, currently being reworked by British screenwriter Abi Morgan, is yet to be revealed, but the protagonist is probably modeled on Stern herself. Aronofsky was jury president of the 65th Berlin Film Festival—where *Victoria* was awarded the Silver Bear for best cinematography.



As his follow-up to *Leviathan*, **Andrei Zvyagintsev** is directing *Loveless*, a drama about a couple going through a bitter divorce ... **Denis Villeneuve** and **Jake Gyllenhaal** (*Enemy*, *Prisoners*) are reteaming for an adaptation of Jo Nesbø's 2014 novel *The Son*, which centers on a drug-addicted convict who learns the truth about his father ... Having premiered his latest film *Aquarius* to great acclaim at Cannes, Brazilian critic-turned-filmmaker **Kleber Mendonça Filho** is ready to go into production on *Bacurau* ("Night-Hawk"), a horror-thriller set in a remote region of Brazil.



IN THE MOMENT | Irm Hermann in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (1972)

No Pressure

IRM HERMANN WAS PART OF RAINER WERNER FASSBINDER'S troupe from the early days of the Anti-Theater Group to the end of his career. She appeared in over 20 feature films he directed, and never had the sole leading role, yet it's impossible to conceive of Fassbinder's work without her presence.

In *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*, Hermann plays Marlene, the submissive assistant of Fräulein von Kant (Margit Carstensen). Over the course of 124 minutes, she doesn't have a single line of dialogue. Yet from her first appearance to her final exit to the tune of the Platters' "The Great Pretender," Marlene's masochistic devotion to and unrequited love for Petra von Kant is soul-breaking to witness.

She is usually a small silhouette in the middle of the frame, working hard at her typing machine. Deprived of words, she wears the mask-like expression of a broken doll. Hermann suspends that look in time through a peculiar style of posing; with the exception of close-ups, she is perpetually a figure in the background. The highly stylized camerawork is careful to keep her in frame as other characters play out the main action in the foreground.

Yet Marlene cannot be dismissed, even when she is often a dimmed shadow in space. Through sound and image, she becomes a key element of the whole piece. When not on screen, she seems even more present through the hammering noise of her slavish labor, which we hear in counterpoint to her mistress's dialogue.

Hermann's performance feeds off a perverse kind of suspense: Marlene gets her power from her potential. By always having to acknowledge her presence on screen, the viewer has the feeling that Marlene might spring into dramatic action at any given moment. Drawing out that possibility for as long as possible allows Hermann to explore the ominous and painful paradox of love without demands.—*Matías Piñeiro*

THE LAST 10 FILMS I'VE SEEN

ALICE WINOCOUR DIRECTOR (*Disorder*)

1. *Graduation* Cristian Mungiu, 2016
2. *American Honey* Andrea Arnold, 2016
3. *Zabriskie Point* Michelangelo Antonioni, 1970
4. *The Abyss* James Cameron, 1989
5. *Tales of Ordinary Madness* Marco Ferreri, 1981
6. *Alice in the Cities* Wim Wenders, 1974
7. *Loves of a Blonde* Milos Forman, 1965
8. *Yi Yi* Edward Yang, 2000
9. *The Miracle Worker* Arthur Penn, 1962
10. *A Touch of Sin* Jia Zhangke, 2013





Love (left) Károly Makk, 1971, Hungarian National Film Fund w/ Hungarian National Digital Film Archive & Film Institute
Sinbad Zoltán Huszárík, 1971, Hungarian National Film Archive



RESTORATION ROW

Dueling Rhapsodies

KÁROLY MAKK'S *Love* AND ZOLTÁN HUSZÁRIK'S *Sinbad* have enjoyed a prominent place in the canon of Hungarian cinema ever since they premiered months apart in 1971. Both deal with fantasy, memory, and romantic fidelity, draw on popular 20th-century literary sources, and rely heavily on montage sequences driven by quick, fluttering cuts across space and time. In *Love*, which Makk and his screenwriter Péter Bacsó adapted from a pair of stories by Tibor Déry set in the aftermath of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, a young woman feeds her dying mother-in-law fantasies about her husband's glamorous life in America after he's abducted and imprisoned by the secret police. *Sinbad* dramatizes the thoughts of a dying Lothario as he looks back on his many affairs; Huszárík adapted the premise from a cycle of stories by the fin de siècle novelist Gyula Krúdy, which took place in a gauzy, fantastical version of Hungary's past.

On closer inspection, however, the two films resemble mirror images of one another. *Sinbad* is shot in opulent color, *Love* in shadowy black and white. Makk dwells on the strength of his characters' fidelity, making much of how staunchly Luca (Mari Töröcsik) refuses to abandon her husband. Huszárík stages a fantasy of infidelity centered on a figure (the handsome Zoltán Latinovits) who flits among lovers without commitment. In both movies, dying figures call up fragmented sequences of images from a distant past. But the associative montages Luca's mother-in-law generates in *Love* are marvels of historical specificity; you could date them to the decade. The sensuously detailed images that *Sinbad* remembers—meals, meetings, journeys, snowfalls, and thaws—are suspended in a lush, fragrant world without a clear chronology or time period.

Makk, who recently turned 90, made *Love* more than 15 years into his career, whereas *Sinbad* was one of just two features Huszárík finished. Like both Krúdy and Latinovits, Huszárík died young, committing suicide in 1981 after the failure of his ambitious follow-up film. The shapes of both directors' careers seem hauntingly reflected in these movies. *Love* takes place largely in a dying woman's sickroom, but its ending, which briefly reunites Luca with her husband, isn't without hope. For all its epicurean shots of flushed bodies, *Sinbad* comes off as the more morbid film. Its jumbled streams of memories seem to emanate from someone whose time is already up.—Max Nelson

NEW AND FORTHCOMING RESTORATIONS

The Crucible Raymond Rouleau, 1957, Pathé
Fernand Léger in America: His New Realism & Birth of a Painting: Kurt Seligmann Thomas Bouchard, 1945/50, Harvard Film Archive
Flesh and the Devil Clarence Brown, 1926, Warner Bros.
The Iron Fist Gabriel García Moreno, 1927, Filmoteca UNAM & Fixafilm



^ *Kapauku* 1954/55-1959 Leopold Pospisil, 1954/55-59, Yale Film Archive
Memories of Underdevelopment Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, 1968, Cineteca di Bologna w/ ICAIC, Les Films du Camélia & The World Cinema Project



^ *Multiple Maniacs* John Waters, 1970, Criterion Collection



^ *One-Eyed Jacks* Marlon Brando, 1961, Universal Pictures & The Film Foundation
Poemfield Nos. 2, 3 & 7 Ken Knowlton & Stan VanDerBeek, 1967-71, The Film-Makers' Cooperative
Rendezvous in July Jacques Becker, 1949, Gaumont

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RAMS

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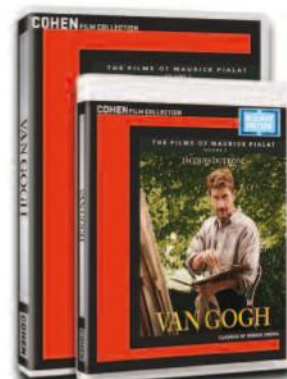
In a secluded valley in Iceland, Gummi and Kiddi live side by side, tending to their sheep. Their ancestral sheep-stock is considered one of the country's best. Although they share the land and a way of life, Gummi and Kiddi have not spoken to each other in four decades.

VAN GOGH

DIRECTED BY MAURICE PIALAT

STREET DATE: JULY 12, 2016 SRP: \$39.98 / \$49.98

After leaving the asylum, Vincent Van Gogh settles in Auvers-sur-Oise, in the home of Doctor Gachet, an art lover and patron. Vincent keeps painting amidst the conflicts with his brother Theo and the torments of his failing mental health. Pialat's examination of the last 60 days of Van Gogh's life earned him a Palme d'Or nomination and stands as his finest masterpiece.



THE LAST DIAMOND

DIRECTED BY ERIC BARBIER

STREET DATE: JULY 26, 2016 SRP: \$24.98

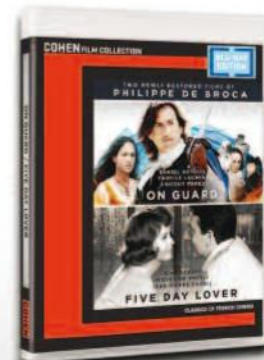
Simon Carrerra has just been released from prison and is now on parole. His friend Albert persuades him back to his old ways with the idea of a big-time heist of a celebrated diamond in Antwerp; The "Florentine". Features an interview with Director Eric Barbier and stars Bérénice Bejo and Yvan Attal.

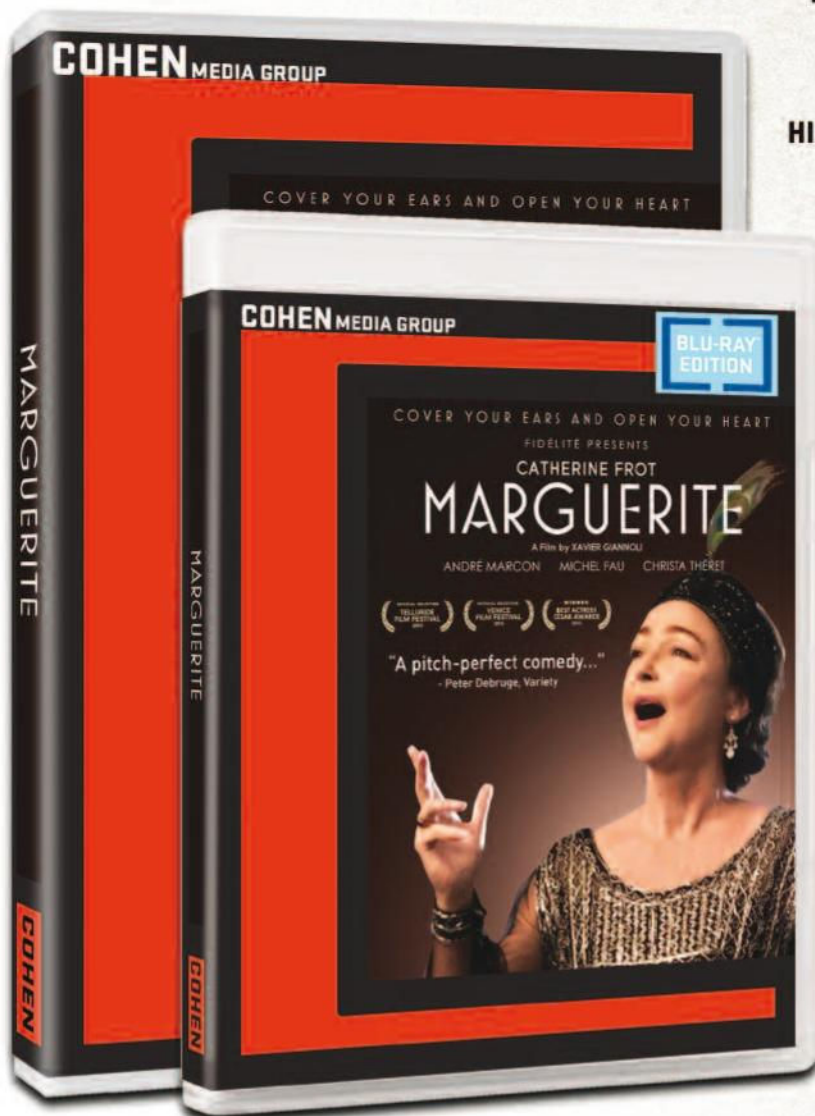
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THE NEW YORK TIMES**

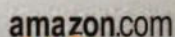
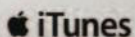
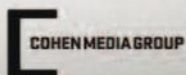


MARGUERITE - DIRECTED BY XAVIER GIANNOLI

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Marguerite Dumont is a rich woman whose whole life is devoted to her passion: music. She sings wholeheartedly, but she sings terribly out of tune. When a young, provocative journalist decides to write a rave article on her latest performance, Marguerite starts to believe even further in her talent. This gives her the courage she needs to train for her first recital in front of a crowd of complete strangers.



Total Freak-Out Frank Zappa, Renaissance man

sound
by Margaret
Barton-Fumo

As a musician, composer, political activist, and filmmaker, Frank Zappa was a consummate misfit whose obstinacy often gave rise to cunning innovation. In 1966, Zappa instigated the “necessity” that brought about The Mothers of Invention when he balked at MGM/Verve’s insistence that his band discard their supposedly obscene name, The Mothers, and convinced the label to accept his revised moniker. As he grew older he collaborated less with real, live, fallible musicians, and instead composed and performed remarkably complex orchestral music using the Synclavier, a sample-based, early digital synthesizer. And as he approached the zenith of his disgust with the American government during the Reagan era, he helped inspire the popular “Rock the Vote” youth movement when he became the first musician to install voter registration booths at each of his concerts.

Spare and entertaining, the new documentary *Eat That Question: Frank Zappa in His Own Words* prioritizes archival material over talking heads, ostensibly allowing the infamously petulant Zappa to speak for himself. The year 2015 produced a string of archive-driven documentaries,

IN FOCUS: *Eat That Question: Frank Zappa in His Own Words* opened on June 24.

from *Listen to Me Marlon* to *What Happened, Miss Simone?* to *Amy*, all of which utilized previously unreleased audiotapes, diaries, and home movies of their subjects. Without access to the legendary Zappa Vault, director Thorsten Schütte excels in his curation of the content at hand with an eye toward Zappa’s inclusive commitment to free speech. Opening with Zappa’s complaint that all interviews are “abnormal,” Schütte presents an appropriately eccentric compilation of clips, which include a 22-year-old Zappa on *The Steve Allen Show*, a bizarre interview with a Pennsylvania state trooper, and excerpts from Zappa’s testimony at the notorious 1985 U.S. Senate hearing on rock lyrics.

Actor and director Alex Winter (*Bill & Ted’s Excellent Adventure*, *Deep Web*) is also working on a promising new documentary on

the man, *Who the F*% is Frank Zappa?*, projected for release in 2017. The Zappa Family Trust has granted Winter unprecedented access to their enormous vault and the thousands of unreleased audio, film, and video recordings therein. Amid the renewed interest sparked by Schütte’s film, hopefully another area of Zappa’s work will come to light: his filmmaking.

In the heyday of the Laurel Canyon music scene Zappa had his own home editing suite (down the road, coincidentally, from the one used by Cassavetes) and directed several films to accompany some of his best-known albums. *200 Motels* (71), which he acrimoniously co-directed with Tony Palmer, was the first feature film to be shot on video and transferred to 35mm Technicolor film. Loosely centered on the concept that touring with a rock band

will make you crazy, the movie both documented and fictionalized the Mothers of Invention road experience, drawing absurdist cameos from Ringo Starr, Keith Moon, and Theodore Bikel. The largely incomprehensible plot is punctuated by the band’s performances with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, just as *Baby Snakes* (79) incorporates footage of Zappa’s 1977 Halloween concert at the Palladium in New York. The highlight of the latter is Bruce Bickford’s abrasively psychedelic claymation sequences, set to Zappa’s whirlwind soundtrack.

While at work on *200 Motels*, Zappa cited an “advanced form of videotape” as the ideal medium for his compositions, through which he could exert complete audiovisual control. He also stated that all of his art should contribute to one overall piece, and *Uncle Meat* (87) reinforces this ideal. Released straight to VHS through Zappa’s own Honker Home Video, *Uncle Meat* has been viewed by some as the delayed prequel to *200 Motels*, with the return of former Mothers members, cinematography by Haskell Wexler, and odd improv skits. Lesser known than his musical output, Zappa’s parallel filmmaking career, overlooked in the new documentary, deserves greater attention. Like his progressive compositions that bound, sway, and skronk into a discordant whole, Zappa’s filmography is divisive and ambitious. □

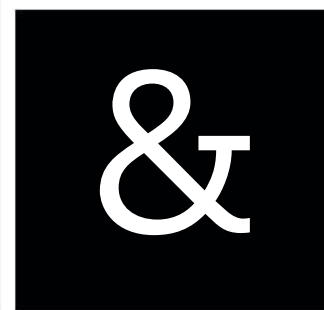
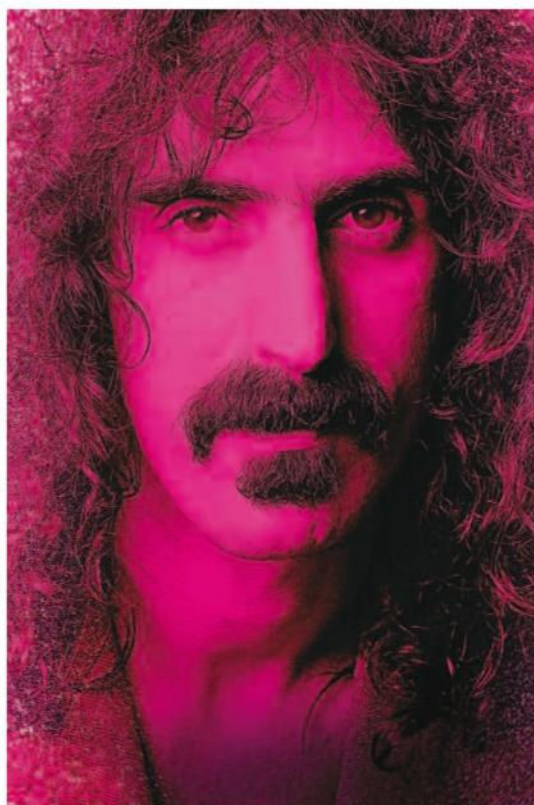
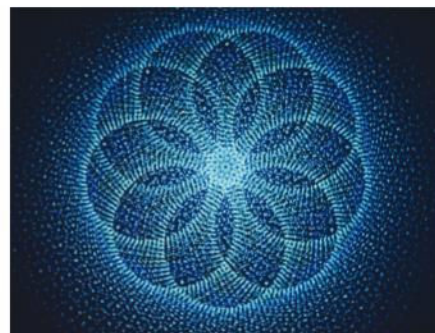
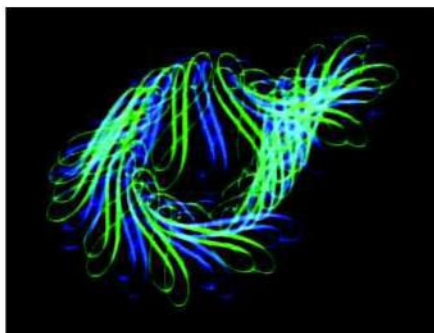


PHOTO BY SAM EMERSON, COURTESY OF SONY PICTURES CLASSICS



Yesterday's Tomorrows The Cold War ecstasies of 1960s computer animation

Every year, we're assured that virtual reality is the future. At times, VR seems to be just another tool for giant media conglomerates seeking to position themselves on the bleeding edge of taste. But as an exhibition of early computer films at Museum of the Moving Image reminds us, corporate patronage of the vanguard can yield groundbreaking art. Several of the filmmakers in MOMI's concise, 37-minute program were in residence at NASA, IBM, and Bell Labs—all leading players in the Cold War—and even repurposed tools of modern warfare to create their art.

A cross section of collaborations between artists and scientists, *Computer Films of the 1960s* offers views of extremely arcane aesthetics and inventive practices. The world's very first computer special effects reel, John Whitney's kinetic *Motion* (61), anchors the program. The pioneering animator, who helped Saul Bass create the opening credits to *Vertigo*, used a decommissioned M-5 anti-aircraft gun sight to animate his films. Whitney rooted his work in

IN FOCUS: *Computer Films of the 1960s* runs through August 14 at Museum of the Moving Image.

vision by Violet Lucca

rhythm, having studied 12-tone technique with composer René Leibowitz in France in his youth. In *Permutations* (68), a short that uses tabla music by K. Balachander, points of colored light cluster together, shift, and then break apart in a variety of geometric patterns against a black background; at other points, solid concentric circles, reminiscent of those appearing in Marcel Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema*, radiate color and merge with one another. (The swirls seem the obvious inspiration for the "Astro-Daters" theater snipes produced by National Screen Service and revived to precede Tarantino's *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* and *Death Proof*.)

These early experimenters drew from other sources engendered by a more connected, globalized world. *Lapis* (66), by Whitney's brother, James, not

only employs a non-Western soundtrack of rolling sitar music but also cycles through kaleidoscopic mandalas of red, blue, and yellow circles, culminating in throbbing mosaic patterns reminiscent of Islamic tile work. Modern-day screensavers made these visuals seem commonplace, but in *Lapis* James Whitney suggested an open-ended system of meaning unbound by the limits of human consciousness. (This unresolvedness is implied with the ouroboros symbol, which appears at the film's beginning and end.) In the words of the MOMI series co-programmer, scholar Gregory Zinman, *Lapis* "is an attempt to portray Pythagoras's music of the spheres via tetractys, or pyramids of dots." The Whitneys' pioneering work inspired Douglas Trumbull's design and execution of the "Star Gate" sequence in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Behind the MOMI's screening amphitheater, a gallery displays copies of Kubrick's written communications with NASA engineers (including one assuring him that plasma rockets weren't feasible for the mission depicted in the film) and Graphic Films, the company that created *To the Moon and Beyond*, the short film Clarke and Kubrick

saw at the 1964 World's Fair that influenced their eventual collaboration. (Graphic Films also created promotional material for NASA.)

While most of the works in MOMI's program use abstract shapes (such as A. Michael Noll's 1965 *Hypercube and Computer-Generated Ballet*, in which stick figures glide across a single plane), Stan VanDerBeek's 1967 *Poemfield No. 5* goes a step beyond by combining computer animation with live footage. Anticipating the barren Hebrides landscapes employed in *2001*'s "Star Gate" sequence, VanDerBeek's short juxtaposes geometric designs and the text of a poem with brightly tinted footage of parachuting men onto fields. Repeated again and again, these superimpositions echo the otherworldliness that nibbles at the edges of abstraction.

A proponent of what he called "Expanded Cinema," VanDerBeek viewed computers as an extension of human consciousness and achieved even greater expressiveness of his philosophical and visual ideas in the decade that followed. Today, the technologies that he and other filmmakers in the MOMI exhibit pioneered have become banal constants in everything from Pixar to *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*. All of which suggests that the cutting edge of contemporary VR will eventually mutate into something we could never expect. □

Athina Rachel Tsangari



Cristian Mungiu



Brian De Palma



Susan Sarandon



Jim Jarmusch



Rebecca Miller



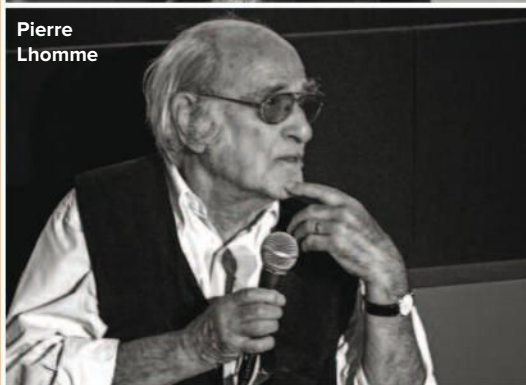
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critics' choice

EIGHT FILM CRITICS RATE RECENT AND UPCOMING RELEASES

<i>The Films</i>	Justin Chang	Manohla Dargis	David Fear	Robert Horton	Todd McCarthy	Amy Nicholson	Nicolas Rapold	Stephanie Zacharek
THE BFG STEVEN SPIELBERG	★★	★★★	★★	★★★★	★		★★	★★★★
CAFÉ SOCIETY WOODY ALLEN	★★★	★		★★★	★★	★★	★★	★
CAPTAIN FANTASTIC MATT ROSS		★★★		★		★★★	★	★★★
CHEVALIER ATHINA RACHEL TSANGARI	★★★		★★★★			★★★★	★★★	
THE CONJURING 2 JAMES WAN	★★★		★★★			★★		★★
DE PALMA NOAH BAUMBACH & JAKE PALTROW	★★★		★★★★	★★★	★★		★★★	★★★★★
DIARY OF A CHAMBERMAID BENOÎT JACQUOT			★★★					★★
FINDING DORY ANDREW STANTON & ANGUS MACLANE	★★★★			★★★★	★★	★★		★★★
HELL OR HIGH WATER DAVID MACKENZIE	★★★★	★★★	★★★					
LITTLE MEN IRA SACHS	★★★★	★	★★★★				★★	
LO AND BEHOLD, REVERIES OF THE CONNECTED WORLD WERNER HERZOG	★★★		★★		★★	★★	★★	
MAGGIE'S PLAN REBECCA MILLER		★		★★★★		★★★	★	
MONEY MONSTER JODIE FOSTER			★★	★★	★	★★		★★★★
MORRIS FROM AMERICA CHAD HARTIGAN	★★★	★★★	★★			★★★★★		
MY KING (MON ROI) MAÏWENN	★★	★					★	★★
THE NEON DEMON NICOLAS WINDING REFN	★★★	🔴	★★★		★	★★	🔴	★★
THE NICE GUYS SHANE BLACK	★★		★★	★★★★	★	★★★★		★★★
OUR LITTLE SISTER HIROKAZU KORE-EDA	★★★	★★★			★★		★★★	
POPSTAR: NEVER STOP NEVER STOPPING AKIVA SCHAEFFER & JORMA TACCONE	★★★		★★★	★★		★★★		★★★
SOUTHSIDE WITH YOU RICHARD TANNE	★★★		★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★		
TICKLED DAVID FARRIER & DYLAN REEVE	★★★	★★★	★★★			★★★★		
THE WAILING NA HONG-JIN	★★★★		★★★			★★	★★★	
WARCRAFT DUNCAN JONES	★★	★★	★★	★★★★		★★★		
WEINER JOSH KRIEGMAN & ELYSE STEINBERG	★★★	★★	★★	★★★★		★★★★★	★★★	
X-MEN: APOCALYPSE BRYAN SINGER	★★★		★★	★★★★	★	★★★		★★

★★★★★ = EXCELLENT ★★★★ = VERY GOOD ★★★ = GOOD ★★ = OF INTEREST ★ = MEDIOCRE 🔴 = BOMB


PARTICIPANTS: Justin Chang of *The Los Angeles Times*, Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times*, David Fear of *Rolling Stone*, Robert Horton of *The Herald* (Everett, Wash.), Todd McCarthy of *The Hollywood Reporter*, Amy Nicholson of *MTV News*, Nicolas Rapold of *Film Comment*, and Stephanie Zacharek of *TIME*



HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

THE CASUAL COMPLEXITY AND LOW-KEY INTENSITY

Personal Shopper

A photograph of actress Kristen Stewart sitting in a green armchair. She is wearing a grey sweater with yellow and brown geometric patterns, dark pants, and white sneakers. The chair has a yellow fringed throw blanket draped over it. The background is a wall with a traditional East Asian ink wash painting of bamboo. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows.

OF KRISTEN STEWART

BY NICK DAVIS

RECENTLY, SOME EPIGRAMMATIST ON TWITTER pronounced: “I love Adele, because you feel like she could be anybody. I hate Katy Perry, because you feel like she could be anybody.” How might this commentator assess Kristen Stewart, another superstar consecrated by the same generation of pop consumers, tilting young and female? With her frank and frequently neutral gaze, her stammers and trapezoidal slouches, her quick and casual diction, Stewart’s performance style is even more quotidian than Adele’s virtuosic channeling of universal laments or Perry’s lavishly synthetic shtick as the roaring Everygirl.

Such apparent lack of varnish, echoing Stewart’s mellow personality, has made her a polarizing performer. While she has enticed advocates throughout her career, probably neither her *Twilight* (08) fans nor high-placed devotees like A. O. Scott of *The New York Times* predicted her recent spike in critical cachet. Two years ago, Stewart premiered new films in three major festivals: at Sundance, *Camp X-Ray* (14), as a female guard at Guantánamo who develops a vexed sympathy with a male detainee; at Cannes, *Clouds of Sils Maria* (14), as the assistant who coddles and needles the star thespian played by Juliette Binoche; and at Toronto, *Still Alice* (14), as the prodigal daughter of Julianne Moore’s fading Alzheimer’s patient. Each movie elicited considerable praise, as did Stewart’s contributions, culminating in several U.S. critics’ prizes for *Clouds of Sils Maria* and her breakthrough as the first American actress to win a César, France’s equivalent of the Oscar.

Now, two years later, Stewart has sustained similar feats. Kelly Reichardt’s ensemble drama *Certain Women* impressed Park City, with Stewart drawing good notices as a night-class instructor befuddled by one student’s wide-eyed reverence. At Cannes, she headlined both the opening film, Woody Allen’s ’30s-set dramedy *Café Society*, and a buzzy Competition entry, *Personal Shopper*, a tender yet terrifying story of grief, covetous desire, and signals from the afterlife. Olivier Assayas, who also guided Stewart through *Sils Maria*, built the newer movie more tightly around his still-rising star and won a Best Director award. If anything, her reviews were stronger than his, yet even effusive responses to Stewart sometimes credit her achievements to others, her concise but nimble artistry registering as serendipity, careful management, or late-breaking surprise.

Café Society finds Stewart making forays into comedy, pastel palettes, and period romance, and thus marks a near-antithesis

to another Stewart vehicle bowing the same day in U.S. cinemas: Drake Doremus’s *Equals* (15), a shivery blue-and-white parable set in a world where feelings have been banished. It’s nothing new for a young female star to anchor an Allen script or a sci-fi dystopia, but these contexts ramify pointedly for Stewart. One challenges her reputation for no-frills sangfroid, while the other embeds that typecasting in its premise. *Certain Women* and *Personal Shopper* less obviously flex Stewart’s range: Reichardt’s affinity for quiet pilgrims perfectly suits this actress, and *Personal Shopper*, however defiantly odd in many respects, also revisits moods and tropes that Assayas and his star have explored in past projects. Far from redundant, though, these films underscore how Stewart’s consistencies are as interesting as her departures, particularly since her technique remains uncommon, her persona as elusive as ever.



From top: *Café Society*, *Equals*

IF STEWART’S TALENTS TAKE PEOPLE aback, no matter how often and variously proved, one probable reason is her commitment to a low-fuss, conversational directness that is rare among modern film performers, particularly in roles that accommodate flashier approaches. Instead, she has persuaded film culture to meet her where she lives—in a laconic, minutely expressive, barely laminated register of acting that’s confusable with “just being.” Actors and filmmakers seem inspired to emulate her non-flamboyance, rather than obligating Stewart to limber up, open out, or reveal capacities for wild emotion and strenuous articulation. I would not deny that Stewart’s abilities have deepened, but in a parallel triumph, she has stretched other people’s definitions of fluency and screen presence.

Two of Stewart’s first three movies were home-invasion thrillers, David Fincher’s *Panic Room* (02) and Mike Figgis’s *Cold Creek Manor* (03). As a teenaged rape survivor in Jessica Sharzer’s *Speak* (04), she routinely locks herself in closets where she can build surreptitious art projects or be alone with her traumatizing secret. In another early vehicle, the Pang Brothers’ *The Messengers* (07), Stewart detects wraiths and portents in their new farmhouse that her parents cannot—a partial premonition of *Personal Shopper*, in which Stewart’s Maureen is, among other things, a medium trying to contact her recently deceased twin brother in a cavernous manse. Enclosure and encroachment have thus been recurring motifs across Stewart’s career, well before her global celebrity lent these themes biographical resonance, but so have slippery dyads between privacy and porosity, seclusion and heightened perception.

Even effusive responses to Stewart sometimes credit her achievements to others, her concise but nimble artistry registering as serendipity, careful management, or late-breaking surprise.



Personal Shopper

Stewart has persuaded film culture to meet her where she lives—in a laconic, minutely expressive, barely laminated register of acting that’s confusable with “just being.”

Beyond the barricaded spaces they often inhabit, Stewart’s characters embody puzzles in themselves that allies and enemies yearn to solve. Teachers, parents, and friends push against Melinda’s confounding reticence in *Speak*; we first spot her drawing imaginary stitches over her mouth with lipstick. In the sterling *Adventureland* (09), Jesse Eisenberg’s James, socially and sexually inhibited himself, resolves to crack Stewart’s reserve but fails to guess her crucial secret. Peyman Moaadi’s prisoner in *Camp X-Ray* harangues Stewart’s soldier into conversation, demanding to know at least her name, which policy requires her to withhold. What starts as his rebuke to arrogant power—which remains cloaked in anonymity while torturing and surveilling its subjects—shifts into a *Dead Man Walking*-style drama of mutual solicitude, but the project of plumbing Stewart’s depths remains the same. The film invests formally in this process of concealing Pfc. Cole even as she provisionally reveals herself, framing her through a narrow window of thick, cross-hatched glass during her climactic testimonial and hiding Stewart’s face under a camouflage cap as the closing music swells.

In these contexts, Stewart’s unembroidered qualities serve a complex purpose. On one hand, her redoubtable poker face and trademark mannerisms—hunching, biting or curling her lip, rolling her eyes amid unvoiced thoughts, looking down, looking far away while cupping her head or her hair—bespeak a tantalizing introversion that stories and scene partners long to unravel. On the other, the sheer ordinariness of these gestures, collapsing any border between acting and behavior, suggests something familiar, even ubiquitous: less the icon of an agitated generation than one of its many median exemplars, the needle but also the haystack.

While seeming to “do” little on screen, Stewart paradoxically renders transparency and impenetrability, rarity as well as its opposite. Accordingly, the more her movies scrutinize Stewart’s characters, the more their putative self-evidence starts to splinter or transform, raising questions not just about what she thinks or hides but what she *is*: oppressor or peon in *Camp X-Ray*, princess or warrior in *Snow White and the Huntsman* (12), pothead or operative in *American Ultra* (15), human or vampire, personal shopper or permeable spiritualist. Even in the stylistically modest *Speak*, as Melinda finally considers disclosing her assault, the film shot-reverses between, suddenly, two Kristen Stewarts conversing

in the same room, broaching that plane of metaphysical mystery that Stewart so repeatedly if unexpectedly connotes.

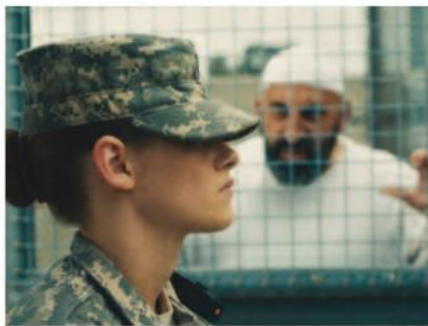
The ostensible game-changer of *Clouds of Sils Maria* thus sustains extant patterns in Stewart’s career, posing friend-or-foe and then fact-or-fiction questions. Moreover, the film’s multifarious meditations on performance recuperate Stewart’s bare-bones style as one credible form of acting, not a rejection of it. Her choices are often subtle, like Valentine’s ease at running lines with Binoche’s Maria without glancing at her script: why does this character know this role so well? At the same time, Stewart’s refusal to play Valentine as self-consciously “enigmatic” gaslights the audience all

the more effectively. Could such a plain-spoken character and actress really be up to anything? Gradually, *Clouds of Sils Maria* absorbs Valentine into a tale of two symmetries, making her a double for Maria’s younger self but also for Chloë Grace Moretz’s very different hot-mess ingénue. Unsure who Valentine really is, we eventually have to ask *whether* Valentine really is. Her inexplicable evaporation before an unblinking camera is simultaneously a blunt truth and bottomless riddle, like Stewart’s whole persona.

IF *Clouds of Sils Maria* MAKES HER candor seductive, Stewart in turn offers the film’s greatest proof that ontological quandaries can be assayed in an offhanded way, minus the hyperboles of a *Mulholland Drive* or *Black Swan*. Whether she found an ideal venue for her preferred mien or inspired its auteur to rethink a genre that favors extravagance is hard to know. Observe, though, how many

scripts and florid idioms Stewart has helped to dial down—a victory not only for film but for female actors, often forced to play emotion divorced from character or story, and cajoled to go big or go home if they want to enter the pantheon. Against that trend, Stewart’s ascendancy has involved no single *Mulholland*-style tour de force, suffusing a deadpan dialogue with maximum emotional (W)attage. She has not had to cry huge, Oscar-friendly tears in close-up while hatching the carnivorous bird within, or make her own arduous labors into a talking point for voters or press.

She has also not offered, as Jennifer Lawrence has, a raucous interview persona to ballast her sedate work in artistically legitimating films like *Clouds of Sils Maria* or *Equals*, which thematizes the ongoing duel between emotion and suppression, or even *The Runaways* (10), made fresher and more poignant by Stewart’s taciturn take on Joan Jett. To be clear, I am not critiquing these other



From top: *Certain Women*, *Camp X-Ray*

IN FOCUS: *Café Society* and *Equals* open July 15. *Personal Shopper* and *Certain Women* will be distributed by IFC Films/Sundance Selects.

She resists compulsory displays, has built a spectrum of interesting art from that resistance, and inspires colleagues and viewers to pose different questions.

formidable performers. Still, mandating charm offensives or voluminous anguish from every young actress can be Hollywood's version of asking all women on the street to smile. Stewart resists compulsory displays, has built a spectrum of interesting art from that resistance, and inspires colleagues and viewers to pose different questions.

For reasons both *Panic Room*-related and persona-driven (tough, brainy, tomboy-ish, fame-averse), Stewart has drawn comparisons to Jodie Foster. Despite, however, marking an analogous graduation into issue dramas and "adult" roles, *Camp X-Ray* is hardly *The Accused*. Its epiphanies are more inchoate, its politics oriented more toward muddying waters than mobilizing change. The film is also, despite scripted winks to Clarice and Hannibal, no *Silence of the Lambs*. Of necessity, Pfc. Cole is a limited heroine; rather than rescue a captive, she hooks one up with a copy of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Sidestepping righteous volatility, curtail the viewer's urge to identify, Stewart insinuates dense moral dramas in the incremental shifts of her face, body, and vocal rhythm. Perhaps her closest analogue is Michelle Williams, who has also marshaled semi-opaque inwardness into a lauded acting style, but in so doing has elaborated a fairly stable notion of "a Michelle Williams part" and even "a Michelle Williams movie." For all their many nuances and virtues, *Land of Plenty*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *The Hawk Is Dying*, *Wendy and Lucy*, *Blue Valentine*, and *Meek's Cutoff* could occupy the same shelf of the video store, if those still existed. Stewart's movies, by contrast, are less tonally and generically uniform—vampire romance, stoner comedy, Southern Gothic, science fiction, old-fashioned weepie, action spectacular, military drama, rock 'n' roll biopic—even as her creative project feels coherent across them.

With *Certain Women*, we find Stewart in her first Michelle Williams movie, literally and figuratively. Her plotline builds to a point where Lily Gladstone's comparably muffled Jamie makes a bold, impulsive gesture to impress Stewart's Beth but prompts instead a long, wordless, semi-scrutable standoff that counts as a dramatic peak. Throughout, in fact, we never know when Beth's friendly but terse responses to Jamie imply exhaustion, class-based discomfort, embarrassed detection of erotic feeling, or just a personal habitus. Stewart and Gladstone convey bottled-up characters without making an incongruously big show of playing reticence, or over-explicating their secrets and pauses. Their exertions turn an anecdote of two people not connecting into a rare display of two actresses doing just that, in ways most movies forbid.

Personal Shopper FINDS STEWART EXERCISING THE SAME knack in a different cinematic cosmos—maybe a different cosmos, period. Disavowing distant looks, ethereal demeanors, and other "mediumistic" clichés, Stewart never dilutes the tale's otherworldly dimensions, yet she pulls them into provocative dialogue with her utterly secular affects. Maureen, a cardiac patient warned against emotional extremes, describes her window on the afterlife as "only, like, slightly ajar," which is what Stewart herself perpetually is to us. Go figure, then, that with tiny, tactical inflections of her narrow expressive wavelength, she manages to indicate a grieving sister, a spiteful gofer, a decadent glamazon, and, in the movie's evocative final line, just herself.

Stewart coaxes us again to ask which of many things she is, while seeming to be so obviously, unremarkably one thing—and to recognize her disparate facets or Maureen's as more compatible than we thought.

Like Assayas's *Irma Vep* (96), *Personal Shopper* is a mercurial study of a mega-celebrity who retains a useful diffidence and an uncanny, almost subliminal erudition, even when her spoken dialogue stutters or trails off. Indeed, linguistic dexterity remains one area where Stewart struggles. When *Still Alice* has her character recite two crucial speeches from Chekhov and Kushner, Stewart speeds through them; her penchant for playing nascent thoughts and feelings behind the words short-changes the poetry. That said, *Still Alice* contains one of Stewart's peak achievements, in part because she grasps Lydia Howland as a scrupulous observer, not a self-exhibitor, which actors playing actors almost never do. In their scenes together, she extracts a moving and layered directness

from Julianne Moore, a wizard at parts requiring conceptual approaches and stylized technique who has sometimes struggled to "just be" on screen. With Stewart, the master becomes the apprentice in a sense, and Moore aces that deceptively difficult aspect of her role.

Directors and castmates who work with Stewart regularly find themselves making a movie they wouldn't have tried with anyone else, or executing their project in novel ways (not unlike Jean-Pierre Léaud's besotted filmmaker and his star in *Irma Vep*). They also discover, as we do, that further, secret movies lie within the images on screen and inside Stewart's bravely restrained, non-prescriptive performances, spurning usual protocols of acting and meaning-making and stoking our imaginative engagement. □

NICK DAVIS is a professor of film, literature, and gender studies at Northwestern University. He also writes film reviews at www.NicksFlickPicks.com.



From top: *Clouds of Sils Maria*, *Still Alice*

Overlooked
and stereotyped,
black performers
of the silent era
today stand out
for their talents



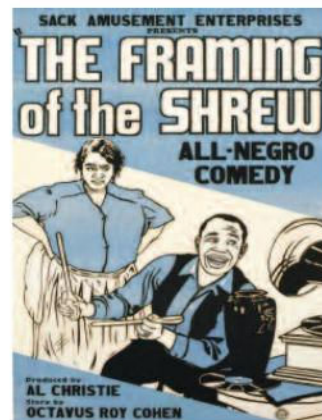
By
**ASHLEY
CLARK**

BEYOND THESE GATES



Lime Kiln Field Day shows Bert Williams to be a leading man of some depth, blending his slapstick qualities with a much more profound sense of loss and yearning.

Opposite: Bert Williams. Left: *Lime Kiln Field Day*, vintage Evelyn Preer poster



WRITING IN THE PREFACE OF HIS CLASSIC 1977 text *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942*, Thomas Cripps lamented that there would be no need for his book at all “were it not for the peculiar racial arrangements in which a highly visible yet numerically inferior ‘black’ group has been customarily, and often legally, ostracized from, exploited by, and occasionally patronized by, a numerically and politically dominant ‘white’ group.” Despite social and legislative gains for African-Americans over the years, and the mirage of a “post-racial” America under Barack Obama, Cripps’s core sentiment retains a hard grain of truth, in life as in art. At this year’s Oscars ceremony, for example, host Chris Rock used his platform to criticize the Academy’s failure to nominate black (and other non-white) performers, *and* to crack acidly about how the “In Memoriam” package would likely only feature black people shot by cops on their way to the movies.

While discussions around racism in film today tend to focus on more nuanced ideas around representation and diversity at the gatekeeper level, there was little complication to be found in the racism of silent-era American film. In the tradition of the minstrel show—one of America’s earliest indigenous art forms—black roles were most often portrayed on film by white actors in burnt-cork blackface makeup. Typical films of the early 20th century boasted bluntly telling titles like *A Nigger in the Woodpile* (1904) and *The Wooing and Wedding of a Coon* (1907), while short film series like *Rastus* (1910–17) and *Sambo* (1909–11) depicted their characters as stupid, lazy, and shiftless. As Marlon Riggs’s disturbing documentary *Ethnic Notions* (86) coolly delineates, these stereotypes, whose presence only metastasized with the growing popularity of cinema, informed how white America viewed black people, and became the basis for the racial tension that existed in Hollywood for decades. Even so, at this early stage, a number of black performers carved out space to showcase their talents, complicate simplistic ideas around race, and lay the groundwork for future generations of black actors to blossom.

IN FOCUS: See our review of *Kino Lorber’s Pioneers of African-American Cinema DVD box set*, available in July, on page 74.

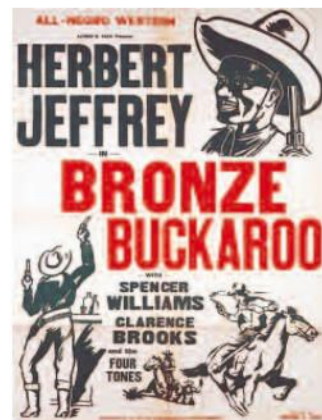
A SENSIBLE PLACE TO BEGIN IS WITH THE STRANGE CAREER of Bert Williams, a near-mythical figure in whom so many of the historic contradictions and tribulations of the black actor in America are sublimated. Williams was born of mixed Danish, West Indian, Spanish, and African heritage in New Providence, Nassau, in the British West Indies (now the Bahamas), in 1874. Though light-skinned, he would come to be classified as black under the “one-drop” rule, which continues to inform constructions of blackness in America today. Some years after emigrating to America with his parents at the age of 11, the tall, stocky Williams partnered with a darker-skinned dancer, George Walker. Sometimes performing under the moniker of “Two Real Coons,” they created a vastly popular vaudeville act that consisted of song-and-dance routines and rapid dialogue centered on Walker trying to convince the slower Williams to join him in get-rich-quick schemes. Williams wore blackface; Walker did not. The pair’s popular act continued until Walker’s death in 1911, after which Williams’s fame only grew: he became the first black man to appear in the Ziegfeld Follies, receiving a prominent billing among many of the most famed white actors of the day.

Williams drew plenty of ire from the black press for producing and directing himself in *Fish* and *A Natural Born Gambler* (both 1916). These shorts find the blackface-encased star, despite his evidently excellent comic timing and remarkable range of facial expressions, displaying the clownish, born-loser bearing of the “Coon”—particularly in *Fish*, in which he plays an overgrown boy with the lickspittle accommodationist impulses of the “Tom.” Williams also starred in the first-ever documented film with an all-black principal cast: *Lime Kiln Field Day* (1913) was discovered by the Museum of Modern Art in their vaults, and reassembled for a public premiere in 2014. This unfinished romantic comedy shows Williams—the only cast member in blackface—to be a leading man of some depth, blending his slapstick qualities with a much more profound sense of loss and yearning, communicated through poignant facial expressions and exquisitely controlled, slightly slumped body language. Williams’s skill and charisma, particularly in sweetly romantic scenes with co-star Odessa Warren Grey, are as startling as the also recovered rushes, which depict the multiracial cast and crew palling around in the New Jersey locations.

Long before MoMA unearthed the film, Williams, who died in

At this early stage, a number of black performers carved out space to showcase their talents, complicate simplistic ideas around race, and lay the groundwork for future generations of black actors.

Sul-Te-Wan in *Maid of Salem*.
Right: *Bronze Buckaroo* poster



1922, had passed into legend as a uniquely tragic figure. W.C. Fields once described him as “the funniest man I ever saw, and the saddest man I ever knew”; the Kittitian-British writer Caryl Phillips turned his life into piercing historical fiction in the novel *Dancing in the Dark*; and Spike Lee used Williams’s career and compromises as a cautionary tale in his neo-blackface satire *Bamboozled* (00). Ann Charters’s 1970 biography of Williams, entitled *Nobody*, claimed that blackface “crippled his talent and limited his achievement . . . As a pioneer he was forced into a blackface role he detested.” However, other scholars, including Jake Austen and Yuval Taylor, have refuted the idea that Williams was ever forced to wear blackface, and that he, as an outsider, intellectual, and auteur, embraced the art form to critique racial notions.

When I spoke to MoMA curator Ron Magliozzi about why *Lime Kiln Field Day* never saw the light of day at the time, he suggested that the 1915 release of D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* effectively poisoned the well for progressive filmmakers. This Civil War and Reconstruction-era epic, famed for its narrative and technical innovations, is also notorious for its virulent racism, embodied most egregiously in its black characters—including lecherous antagonist Gus (Walter Long)—who are mostly played by white actors in blackface. However, discussions of the film traditionally fail to account for one curious, ironic aspect of its production: the presence of one Madame Sul-Te-Wan, a little-known black performer who had a small role in the film as a woman who chastises a former slaveholder as he is paraded in front of his ex-slaves. Her character was also supposed to have a scene in which she spat in the face of the man’s wife; sadly, it was cut. One wonders how iconic this scene might have become.

As reported in compelling detail by Donald Bogle in his book *Bright Boulevards, Bold Dreams: The Story of Black Hollywood*, this laundress—and daughter of a freed slave—was late on her rent when she heard that fellow Kentuckian Griffith was soon going into production on his latest film, to be based on Thomas Dixon’s novel *The Clansman*. She begged Griffith for a job, and he hired her on the spot, paying her \$3 a day. He soon signed her to a contract that paid \$25 a week. As such, she became the first black female actor tied to a Hollywood contract.

When *The Birth of a Nation* was protested in Los Angeles, the studio accused Sul-Te-Wan of stirring up black sentiment against the film, and she was summarily released from her contract. But

after contacting the prominent black attorney Edward Burton Ceruti, she was soon returned to the Majestic Motion Picture Company payroll, and would remain lifelong friends with Griffith. Sul-Te-Wan subsequently made a productive transition from silent to sound pictures and enjoyed a lengthy career that also included vaudevillian stage stints in the vein of Walker and Williams. Her most prominent film role would arrive in 1937 with Frank Lloyd’s *Maid of Salem*, in which she gave a harrowing, raw-throated turn as the doomed Tituba, a 17th-century West Indian slave who was the first to be accused of practicing witchcraft during the 1692 Salem witch trials. Ultimately, though, Sul-Te-Wan was restricted to playing one-dimensional, stereotypical characters, like her better-known contemporaries Butterfly McQueen and the Oscar-winning Hattie McDaniel, both of whom starred as maids in Victor Fleming’s *Gone with the Wind* (39). In 1954, after nearly 40 years of playing domestics, Madame Sul-Te-Wan was finally able to break type when she was cast in Otto Preminger’s black-cast musical *Carmen Jones* in a minor but touching and uncredited role as the grandmother of the eponymous character (Dorothy Dandridge).

WHILE NEGATIVE BLACK STEREOTYPES—AND severely limited roles—were the Hollywood norm for the first half of the 20th century, there was more variety on offer in what came to be known as “race movies,” a thematically and stylistically diverse group of low-budget films written, directed, performed, and frequently funded, distributed, and exhibited by black filmmakers. Working independently of the Hollywood studio system, they made films for de jure segregated theaters in the South and de facto segregated theaters in the North. At the height of the movement, there were over 1,000 theaters that screened black-audience films either exclusively or on a preferential basis.

Some pioneers of the race-movies era played multiple roles. Spencer Williams, a director of 12 films—the most remarkable of which is the woozy religious fable *The Blood of Jesus* (41)—later gained fame for his bumptious portrayal of Andy in the controversial 1950s television comedy series *Amos ’n’ Andy*. Missouri-born Noble Johnson, meanwhile, launched his own studio, the Lincoln Motion Picture Company, in 1916, and, in a proto-Cassavetean show of pragmatic endurance, pulled double duty appearing in



In reacting to myriad traumas, the remarkably restrained Evelyn Preer conveys a sense of deep despair, as if haunted by the ghosts of history.

Left: Lorenzo Tucker in *Reet, Petite, and Gone*.

Right: Evelyn Preer



dozens of films for major Hollywood studios. Though Johnson, an imposing figure at six-foot-two and 200-plus pounds, played many black roles, he used his mutable features to essay a range of ethnicities, a luxury rarely if ever afforded to darker-skinned black actors. In his most striking part, Johnson was effectively “whited up” to play Ivan the Cossack, a terrifying, mute Russian, alongside Joel McCrea and Fay Wray in Irving Pichel and Ernest B. Schoedsack’s 1932 chiller *The Most Dangerous Game*.

However, the best-known purveyor of “race movies” was Illinois-born Oscar Micheaux, and it was under his direction that a talented actress named Evelyn Preer made her name. This Mississippi native appeared in Micheaux’s debut, *The Homesteader* (19), which is now considered lost, and proceeded to take the lead role in his follow-up, *Within Our Gates* (20). This absorbing film, designed as a riposte to *The Birth of a Nation*, had also been considered lost until a copy was discovered in the Spanish Film Archive in Madrid in 1990. (It has recently been restored and rescored by distributor Kino Lorber.) Preer starred as Sylvia Landry, an African-American woman who travels north in an effort to raise money for a rural school in the Deep South for poor black children. Her romance with a black doctor (James D. Ruffin, an amateur actor who manages to give a turn simultaneously stiff and limp) leads to painful revelations about her family’s past and her own mixed-race, European ancestry. The film portrays racist violence in a climate of white supremacy, including the unsparingly rendered lynching of a black man. In reacting to myriad traumas, the remarkably restrained Preer conveys a sense of deep despair, as if haunted by the ghosts of history.

In 1920, the same year as *Within Our Gates*, Preer joined the Lafayette Players in Chicago, a theatrical stock company founded in 1915 by Anita Bush, a pioneering stage and film actress known as “The Little Mother of Black Drama.” Bush and her acting troupe toured the nation to bring legitimate theater to black audiences in a time of segregation. The Lafayette group produced films, including *The Framing of the Shrew* (29), thought to be the first Shakespeare spin-off with an all-black cast. In it, Preer gives a deft comic performance as the titular troublemaker—rambunctious and commanding where Sylvia Landry was tender and tremulous. Preer also developed a parallel career as a blues singer. By the end of the 1920s, Preer’s impressive range of talents led her to Hollywood, where she signed a contract with Paramount and appeared in a series of often

uncredited minor roles. Sadly, she died of double pneumonia in 1932 at the age of 36, months after giving birth to her only child.

IF PREER HAD A MALE ANALOGUE IN THE RACE MOVIES canon, it was the tall, light-skinned, handsome Lorenzo Tucker, dubbed “The Colored Valentino” by Micheaux in one of the director’s characteristic entrepreneurial flashes (Tucker is now, however, referred to more widely as “The Black Valentino”—a more PC term). By the time the Philadelphia-born performer first met Micheaux as a 19-year-old in 1926, he’d performed with Bessie Smith, the legendary blues singer, in black theaters across the country. From 1927 to 1936, he starred in more than 10 Micheaux pictures, minting a louche but not lascivious expressive acting style. Many of these are now lost, but some excerpts remain, including elements of the controversial *Veiled Aristocrats* (32). In it, Tucker plays a black man who successfully passes as white, and returns home to coax his sister into doing the same. The plot prefigured the likes of *Imitation of Life* (34) and *Pinky* (49), melodramatic films featuring light-skinned black characters concealing their true identities in pursuit of a less troubled existence in a racist society.

The poignancy of *Veiled Aristocrats*, even in its bowdlerized form, is intensified by the parallels between Tucker’s role and his own life. In a moving interview with *Black Film Review* shortly before his death in 1986, Tucker spoke of how racial preconceptions affected him: “Throughout my career I could have passed for white and forgotten all about my race, and at times I have taken roles meant for whites,” he said. “It would have been easier that way, passing for white and keeping my past a secret, like others did, but I chose to be considered as colored. You see, I still want to prove that the Negro race is not all Blackskinned; we’re all shades of the rainbow.” As exemplified by this eloquent quotation, Tucker’s racial pride stands in stark opposition to a system of representation designed to dramatically devalue and simplify black life in the silent era. He was just one trailblazer who used the power of expression and gesture—and the gift of visibility—to foment a quiet revolution of black resistance in a time before talkies. □

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P *Private Property* (60) IS A TENSE, seamy, low-budget black-and-white thriller, once almost forgotten, now recently restored. It was shot over the course of 10 days in July 1959, in the home of writer-director Leslie Stevens and an empty neighboring property that overlooked his swimming pool. It was upon learning that the house next door was unoccupied that Stevens came up with his movie's key image, that of two drifters watching the life of a married couple—particularly the lonely, vulnerable, and alluring housewife—from the upstairs window of the adjacent home, and from there he developed his scenario. Stevens cast his own wife at the time, Kate Manx, as the movie's housewife. Corey Allen, best known as “chickie run” casualty Buzz Gunderson from Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (55), played the alpha of the drifter duo, the suave, unctuous Duke, who promises to get his lank, spacey partner, Boots, his first piece of action. (The two communicate in a bizarre scumbag-beatnik patois, making free use of such phrases as “pink twitch,” “fandango,” and “schmegegge-head.”) In the role of Boots, Stevens cast Warren Oates, a hard-drinking 31-year-old actor who almost exclusively worked in television at that point, and who had experienced something of a windfall when the TV Western bonanza created a receptive market for his Western Kentucky twang and crude character actor

Warren Oates and
the Endangered
Blue-Collar Actor

OUT OF WORK

By Nick Pinkerton



Warren Oates in *Private Property*



features, like a clay bust titled “Podunk.”

The first endeavor by Stevens, a former playwright and Mercury Theatre apprentice, and his producing partner Stanley Colbert, who billed themselves as “America’s only authentic New Wave filmmakers,” *Private Property* at times feels closer to the 1961 Johnny Cash–starring home-invasion trash-classic *Five Minutes to Live* (aka *Door-to-Door Maniac*) than to Claude Chabrol’s *Les Bonnes femmes*. But it does sustain an admirably lurid, sticky atmosphere, and Stevens’s voyeuristic premise lends itself to audience implication, for when Allen and Oates stare down at the terrace of the Stevens home, licking their chops with outsider-looking-in covetousness, they’re doing exactly what viewers in cinemas and living rooms were long accustomed to doing—peeping in at worlds of material comfort, and hankering after what they saw. The sense of smoldering have-not resentment is present from the film’s opening, in which Duke and Boots catch a ride with a middle-aged traveling salesman for the Sacramento Appliance Company, who brags about his “custom job” ’54 Skylark and, when the boys start drooling over Miss Manx, decides to give them a smug lesson in class boundaries: “That type of lady wouldn’t give you the time of day. Now, let me give you a tip: things are divided into groups—separated, like birds, animals, reptiles. You don’t breed a bird with a snake, it just can’t happen. It’s exactly the same with people; you can’t mix the groups.”

Warren Oates came from a group that didn’t overwhelmingly tend to find its way into movies—his career trajectory was a long shot in 1960, and seems almost unfathomable today. He was born on the cusp of the Depression in Depoy, a boondock town in Muhlenberg County, western Kentucky, to a family of modest shopkeepers whose fortunes shifted for the worse as the region’s short-lived soft coal boom dried up. As a boy in Depoy

IN FOCUS: A 4K digital restoration of *Private Property* will open on July 4 at the Film Society of Lincoln Center, midway through their weeklong retrospective *Warren Oates: Hired Hand*.



Warren Oates in *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*

Much about Oates’s screen presence is familiar in *Private Property*—the slitted, screwed-up, oft-blinking eyes; the overbite; and the thick, loose, rubbery lips, often left hanging open to catch flies.

he suckered tobacco and picked strawberries and worked with road crews and rang the bell at the Oak Grove Baptist Church, then moved to the metropolis of Louisville with his family, a migration toward cities and factories common among the genteel and not-so-genteel poor looking for work during the years leading up to the war. He was just a tad too young for World War II, but went into the Marine Corps anyway after flunking out of Louisville Male High School, then came back to attend the University of Louisville on the G.I. Bill, there discovering his passion for treading the boards.

By the time Oates was appearing before the camera for Stevens, he had already racked up a handful of film credits and quite a few in TV—first in New York, where he’d worked only intermittently, then in Los Angeles, where he’d become a hot commodity playing a variety of villains, deputies, bumpkins, wastrels, or some combination of the above. He appeared in programs like *Have Gun—Will Travel*,

Wanted: Dead or Alive, *Trackdown*, *Buckskin*, and *The Rifleman*, on the set of which he met the young director Sam Peckinpah, with whom he would be associated more than with any other single figure. (At the same time another native of the Bluegrass State, Harry Dean Stanton, was working the same circuit.) Much about Oates’s screen presence is familiar in *Private Property*—the slitted, screwed-up, oft-blinking eyes; the overbite; and the thick, loose, rubbery lips, often left hanging open to catch flies, the universal symbol of a slightly dim mouth-breather. He hasn’t made money enough to have his teeth capped yet, and his vocal inflection sounds a bit off, as though Oates is putting a damper on his drawl. He is skinny, skinnier even than we’re used to seeing him, and he gives the impression of being acquainted with actual, gnawing, lean-coyote hunger.

WHILE FILM HISTORY HAS its share of vocational earth mothers, gingham gals, wised-up dance-hall dames, and nowheresville slatterns, the mythology of the working-class male actor is something distinct, and worth examining by itself. There is a tendency with actors from salt-of-the-earth backgrounds to attribute the specificities of their screen presences to something in their class origins that’s stayed with them like tenacious dirt under manicured nails, an existential

quality of “authenticity” (a word rarely found wandering outside the care of scare quotes in these Poptimistic times). Acting instructor Wynn Handman, who trained Oates at his Manhattan studio in the early ’50s, found in him “a strong American spirit [who] gave off deep feelings of the heart of America.” And so it may seem to us—but this doesn’t change the fact that Handman had to equip this raw young actor with a stylistic tool kit through which he could express this spirit, and that this most authentic westerner had to be taught how to ride a horse when the Western roles started coming in. (The mask became the face in time, and on his death Oates’s ashes were scattered over his ranch in Montana’s Paradise Valley.) The stereotypical Oates part is perhaps that of the none-too-bright backwoodsman—the forcibly bathed Henry Hammond in Peckinpah’s *Ride the High Country* (62), for example—but he had significantly more range than he was sometimes given credit for, and perhaps the finest job of work that this pure natural ever did was a creation of pure imposture and artifice, his chronic fibber and middle-class boor with a fresh-off-the-line GTO in Monte Hellman’s *Two-Lane Blacktop* (71).

Issues of representation seem to be among the few matters that can attract the attention of the wider public to the subject of the cinema—aesthetic criticism certainly doesn’t—and articles monitoring and measuring the proportional presence of race or gender in one field or another relating to the motion picture arts, usually absent any further qualitative evaluation, are widely shared and discussed. The commentating caste in the U.S. has often remained curiously mum on the subject of class, however—it’s less readily quantifiable, impolite to speak about, and more likely to implicate college-boy-and-girl commenters who grew up with a doorman. But let’s be impolitic for a moment and ask: where is our Warren Oates? Who are the American blue-collar stars of today, and to what degree does their film work reflect their backgrounds?

Looking for a contemporary Warren Oates, it may not make sense to consider leading men. He was an unusual case, for to all appearances he was born a character

Even where younger working-class stars have established themselves as forces to be reckoned with, it’s seldom in roles that call on them to remember what it was to work for a living, and show that memory in their carriage.

actor, but by sheer dint of talent made his way into at least a handful of leads—as the eponymous Hoosier outlaw in John Milius’s *Dillinger* (73), as a dipso lounge pianist tickling the ivories for gringo tourists in a sleazy Mexico City cantina in Peckinpah’s *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia* (74), and in Hellman’s *Cockfighter* (74) as a practitioner of the sport of kings who has taken a vow of silence until he receives the prestigious Cockfighter of the Year Award.

Oates seemed destined early on for a Walter Brennan or Jack Elam-type career, but the New Hollywood years were something of a golden age for the character actor—think Stanton, John Cazale, Peter Boyle, Rip Torn—and in this respect Oates’s big break seems very attached to the particular circumstances of the American movie business in the 1970s. In the time immediately preceding Oates’s fatal 1982 heart attack, which laid him low at the age of 53, he was no longer getting



Steve Buscemi (right) in *Trees Lounge*

leads. His last parts were supporting bits in the posthumously released *Blue Thunder* and *Tough Enough* (both 83)—not quite as ignoble a swan song as Lee Marvin’s work in Menahem Golan’s *The Delta Force* (86), opposite Chuck Norris, but still a far cry from the caliber of gigs he’d been getting only 10 years earlier. And while the confluence of circumstances that created the New Hollywood won’t be coming around again, that won’t keep moviemakers from trying to cash in on vintage intellectual properties. Remakes of quintessential ’70s products *The Last House on the Left* and Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs*, in 2009 and 2011 respectively, with the latter’s action moved to rural Mississippi, only served to point out Hollywood’s apparent total lack of plausible peckerwoods, rednecks, and hayseeds, even to serve in stock leering-villain roles. If we are searching for the ghost of Warren Oates, then, we might look at the crossover character actors: a Walton Goggins, who will have his choice of every hillbilly role turned down by Billy Bob Thornton from here to the grave by mere virtue of being named “Walton Goggins,” or a John Hawkes, or a Steve Buscemi, a Brooklyn-born FDNY veteran and son of a sanitation worker. (Both Goggins and Hawkes, like Oates, broke through in rare contemporary TV Westerns: *Justified* and *Deadwood*.)

THERE ARE CERTAINLY INSTANCES of film stars whose bearings seem to be informed by their hardscrabble early histories: Gary Cooper’s real-life cowboying on the family’s Seven-Bar-Nine ranch on the Missouri River; teenage reprobate Robert Mitchum working on the chain gang in Georgia; John Garfield, né Jacob Julius Garfinkle, with his latchkey Lower East Side backstory; strapping seaman Sterling Hayden discovered by a *Boston Post* photographer while serving on a racing schooner; Woody Strode, a decathlete from Los Angeles, one of a great many African-Americans enabled to enter acting by way of previous sports stardom; Charles Bronson, coming out of the mines of Ehrenfeld, Pennsylvania, and straight into a tail-gunner slot in the Pacific

Theater. But for every instance where the cinematic persona seems to spring naturally from real-life circumstances, there is a counterexample in which the actual and the performed life seem unrelated, even at odds. When Oates was an ardent teenage moviegoer in Louisville, going to downtown movie palaces to escape the ribbing he'd get from the city slickers for his country cousin manner, his favorite actor was Humphrey Bogart, the epitome of lowlife grit and the spoiled eldest son of a well-to-do Episcopalian family who lived on 103rd Street near Manhattan's tony Riverside Drive, spending his boyhood in prep schools and his summers on a nice parcel of land near Canandaigua Lake upstate. John Wayne's boyhood existence in Iowa and Southern California wasn't one of riding the range and roping steer but, in Andrew Sarris's memorable phrase, that of "a druggist's son in pinched middle-class surroundings." And the movies could confer upward mobility as well, perhaps most famously in the case of Cary Grant, the distillation of sophistication and glamor on the screen, born Archibald Leach in the dowdy Bristol suburbs.

Grant escaped his class destiny by emigrating as a teenager, and today his transatlantic passage has been imitated by a number of black actors from the U.K. less able to find steady work at home (David Harewood, David Oyelowo, Thandie Newton, and others). This has been a favorite subject of *The Guardian*, who now every few months runs an article endeavoring to explain, per the title of the most recent version, "Why Working-Class Actors Are a Disappearing Breed." This edition notes that most of today's top talent come from private-school backgrounds, and that a recent survey from the London School of Economics and Goldsmiths College had determined that only around a quarter of actors in the United Kingdom come from the working class, while highlighting the case of exception-that-proves-the-rule John Boyega, the rogue stormtrooper Finn in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, and the South London-raised son of Nigerian immigrants. Costarring with Boyega in the film was Adam Driver, a resident of Mishawaka, Indiana, from age 7, and, like Oates, a good Baptist

The action and adventure films that the major Hollywood players prioritize today are not the sort of thing in which a life-marred screen presence is necessarily an asset.

and a Marine Corps veteran. It will be a piquant irony if Driver, an offbeat sex symbol with jug ears, a crooked American mutt physiognomy, and a marble-hewn torso that's almost double-take-worthily mismatched with his funny-pages face, is the breakout cinema star from the cast of the HBO series *Girls*, which was infamous before its premiere for the perceived nepotism in its casting, evident in the posh pedigrees of its female leads.

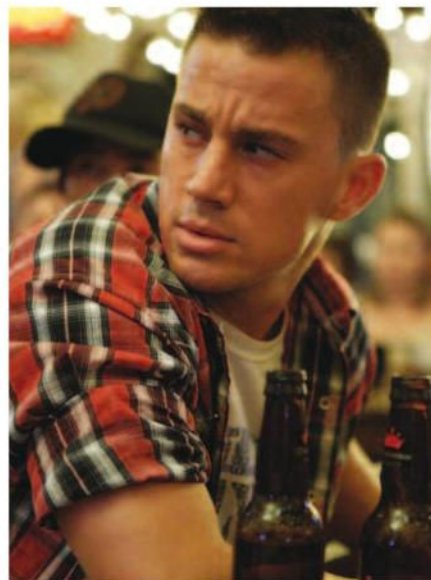
Neither Boyega nor Driver are yet among Hollywood's handful of working-class kids who are proven box-office. At the top of the heap in the Eastern urban division are Mark Wahlberg (Dorchester, Boston) and Denzel Washington (Mt. Vernon, New York), both of whom have variously cashed in on their neighborhood, street-corner bona fides, Washington particularly hamming it up in his last couple of Tony Scott collaborations. In the country-fried category we can include Matthew McConaughey and Kentucky native Johnny Depp. Tom

Cruise, born Thomas Mapother IV in Syracuse, spent his peripatetic youth in often straitened circumstances with an abusive father, but if anyone can be said to have transcended class it is this rare, strange being—is there any sight in cinema as disconcerting as Cruise operating a crane on the docks of New Jersey, or pretending not to know what hummus is at the beginning of Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (05)? Jason Statham is, of course, not American-born, but he starred in a movie called *Homefront* (13), in which he appears bedecked in stars and stripes on the poster despite making no attempt whatsoever to efface his Derbyshire brogue in the film itself, which has to be worth some kind of honorary citizenship.

Among leading men under 40 there aren't a lot of working-class comers, though not for lack of trying. When a relatively unknown Australian actor named Sam Worthington landed in a slew of blockbusters including James Cameron's *Avatar* (09), publicists were very eager to inform the magazine profile readers of America that before going into drama school he had worked as a bricklayer—this was, perhaps, where his true talent lay. (Worthington came with a wave of imported Commonwealth performers who have been filling working-class Yank roles—just throw Joel Edgerton in some Dickies!) More recently we've seen a career overhaul of



Adam Driver in *This Is Where I Leave You*



Channing Tatum in *Stop-Loss*

television-comedy-star-turned-amiable-blockbuster-anchor Chris Pratt, once a community college dropout whose stint using a van in Maui as his address has eclipsed Jewel's living in a car as the aspirational fable du jour. During this time Pratt dabbled as an ecdysiast, though this is nowhere near so central to his legend as it is to that of Channing Tatum, who in his 2012 film à clef *Magic Mike*, a collaboration with Steven Soderbergh, dramatized his personal history as a roofer-cum-stripper. This post-Great Recession sex-work fable finds the working man, in absence of a factory floor, discovering new ways to trade with his body, and points to a possible siphon taking blue-collar performers away from the field of drama: what we colloquially refer to as the "adult entertainment industry." To set aside the men for a moment, if you are a young woman coming from nothing, mightn't the career of (onetime Soderbergh star) Sasha Grey seem more feasible than that of, say, Meryl Streep? Folks without money are used to going where the work is, whether it's a rush on soft coal or TV Westerns.

EVEN WHERE YOUNGER WORKING-class stars have established themselves as forces to be reckoned with, it's seldom in roles that refer to the circumstances in which they were raised, or which call on them to remember what it was to work for a living, and show that memory in their carriage. *The Force Awakens* is not particularly concerned with fine points of class, and it is hard to extract anything that either Boyega or Driver do or say in it which might have encouraged them to access their pasts in Peckham or Misha-waka. (Early reports of Driver's work with Jim Jarmusch in *Paterson*, however, give cause for hope.) Likewise, when Chris Pratt is jogging in front of a green screen, fleeing dinosaurs or bantering with a CG raccoon voiced by Bradley Cooper, he does not "vibrate with deep feelings of the heart of America." The action and adventure films that the major Hollywood players prioritize today are fantasy/sci-fi/superhero tentpoles, not the sort of thing in which a life-marred screen presence is

necessarily an asset. The decline of the Western is old news—the oater hasn't been a studio priority for nearly 40 years, though an Antoine Fuqua *The Magnificent Seven*, with Washington and Pratt, looms grotesquely on the horizon—but now we're seeing the increasing marginalization of middle-range genre material, the sort of thing that Bronson made a mint from, and which Wahlberg and Statham are among the few contemporary stalwarts of.

If there is no contemporary equivalent to Warren Oates, we might conclude that the parts that made a Warren Oates possible are no longer out there. Further, we might say that the country that produced him no longer exists, just as the "working man" serenaded by Merle Haggard died long before Hag did, and that the Cross-Fit, protein shake-weaned Nashville professional is as authentic a representative of the Heart of America as any outlaw nostalgia trip. A professor friend, recently retired from teaching in southwest Ohio, noted a change in his classrooms in recent years: none of the students knew the function of a transmission anymore. Oates was born into a nation that worked with its hands, whose population was fairly evenly divided between city and country-dwellers; we are now fully four-fifths urbanites. Employment in agricultural and manufacturing sectors has steadily tapered off, while service, clerical, and managerial positions make up an ever greater part of the job pool. What'll it be: the clip-on tie, the fast-food window, or a meth habit? But are there really no undiscovered talents in Depoy or somewhere like it, or have the barriers between America's Depoys and Hollywood become too daunting to consider? Are the working-class actors of the future extinct? Or are they out there, fitfully watching the images from which they are excluded, like Duke and Boots looking down at the swimming pool from the picture window, watching and seething from outside the gates of Hollywood's private property? □

NICK PINKERTON is a regular contributor to *FILM COMMENT* and a member of the *New York Film Critics Circle*.


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VANISHING POINT

In the existential war film *Neither Heaven Nor Earth*, French artist-filmmaker Clément Cogitore considers irreducible questions and irreconcilable conflicts
BY YONCA TALU



HOW DOES ONE MOURN WHEN THERE ARE NO BODIES to mourn over? This ever-present question provides the premise on which Clément Cogitore has built his new film. In *Neither Heaven Nor Earth*, some form of divine intervention leads to the mysterious disappearance of four French soldiers from an Afghanistan outpost. The film immerses us in the quotidian hell of the remaining, exiled soldiers as they cope with longing and confinement. Most disquieting are the nocturnal scenes that allow the viewer to share the perspective of the night watchmen via infrared POV shots filmed through binoculars; the soldiers' faces are lit in chiaroscuro with headlamps. These eerie episodes are infused with the anxiety of not knowing when and where the enemy will strike.

Neither Heaven Nor Earth is the debut feature of Cogitore, a 32-year-old visual artist from Alsace whose strong affinity for hybrid art forms led him to blend media as varied as video, installation, photography, and performance art. Bearing the aesthetic and thematic hallmarks of Cogitore's gallery art, his film is located at the intersection of documentary and fiction, as well as of different genres, including thriller, horror, and the war movie. The fusion of registers can be attributed as much to Cogitore as to his co-writer Thomas Bidegain, who's attempted similar hybrids in his collaborations with Jacques Audiard.

Cogitore's latest photography series, *Digital Desert* (15), consists of still-life images of pixelated camouflage uniforms and their matching helmets, assembled into what looks like a pile of skulls and bones on a rocky, arid plain. Blending into the monochrome pallor of this isolated no man's land, the military garments act as mementos mori: stripped of the bodies that once wore them, they have become useless debris, signifiers of the past, in a landscape perpetually informed by death and decay. *Digital Desert* offers a compelling point of entry into the complex metaphysical construct of *Neither Heaven Nor Earth*, with which it was developed concurrently. Intrinsic to both the photographs

and the film is the notion of disappearance, which the artist considers to be a fundamental enigma of human existence.

At the heart of *Neither Heaven Nor Earth* lies a dichotomy between the mysticism embraced by the Afghan locals and the rationalism championed by the French troops. The rational stance is most fully embodied by the rigorous and dispassionate Captain Bonassieu (Jérémy Renier), the obstinate commander of the outpost and a brutal colonizer in his own right. His soldiers enjoy a privileged authority over the civilians, who are denied some basic rights (including free ownership of their lands) and kept at bay from the military camp, while their military overseers turn up without notice and raid the village whenever they deem it necessary. This all-too-familiar scenario represents what the director calls the "Western art of warfare," encompassing the ways in which modern armies take possession of and rule territories around the world.

With the specter of death looming over them, the soldiers in the film have no choice but to cling to their beliefs. For some, this means confiding in God and asking to receive a benediction from a priest. For others, like Bonassieu, it means pursuing their battle against the invincible until they lose their minds. Cogitore undertakes thrilling formal experiments to depict this psychological turmoil: paced to the rhythm of a throbbing electronic score, the latter half of the film hosts an explosive and visceral clash of images generated through brisk camera movements and mercurial editing. In the chaotic final act, linearity and logic are replaced by a disembodied narrative, in which the viewer is made to fully identify with the soldiers' demented psyches. No longer a naturalistic setting, the military camp seems haunted by the ghosts of all those who have disappeared.

Rooted equally in myth and actuality, Cogitore's oeuvre aims to reconcile the physical world with the invisible sacred world that lies behind it—like the forest of symbols that Bonassieu traverses to find his vanished comrades.



THE INTERVIEW: Clément Cogitore

The critic Jean-Michel Frodon writes movingly: "Believing in nothing doesn't mean not believing at all. It is a way of opening oneself to the indecisiveness of the world." That summarizes perfectly what happens to Captain Bonassieu in the film.

This character is someone who has almost been trained to control. I think that the rational Occidental man functions this way. All the tools that are at his disposal are there to help him take control and possession of the physical world. We read the world through a rationalist grid, and 80 to 90 percent of physical phenomena enter this grid. The world, for the most part, functions in a rational way. But there is a window of 10 percent that does not enter this grid. And so beliefs take charge of this remaining part: the enigma of whether there is life after death or not, the enigma of the meaning of dreams, the enigma of the experience of love. These are, whatever the civilization, handled by beliefs.

IN FOCUS: *Neither Heaven Nor Earth* opens on August 5.



“This phenomenon of disappearance becomes a sort of metaphor for all the unanswered questions that a man encounters in his life.”



I don't think that human experience ever happens outside of belief. Rationalism is also a belief in its own way. The human psyche, to construct communities, to construct civilizations, to construct a model, must at some point substitute belief for the fundamental enigma of the world. And this is something that I tried to talk about in the film. Something always escapes the characters and resists their understanding, and at some point the protocol doesn't suffice anymore, the weapons don't suffice anymore, and they have to call on something else within themselves to be able to live with that mystery. And this phenomenon of disappearance becomes a sort of metaphor for all the unanswered questions that a man encounters in his life.

How is the film in dialogue with your gallery art, and what made you gravitate toward a more narrative approach?

All my work, be it photography, documentary, or performance art, is centered on the question of faith, visibility and invisibility, and stories that deal with the limitations of human vision and rational explanations, and the mind's confrontation with the visible world. The film speaks of invisibility and of an unexplained phenomenon. Throughout the film, I overturn the audience's expectations: every 20 minutes I change the tone a little, and for this to function I need people to believe, from the very start, in an extremely concrete reality, with simple and identifiable things, which also plays a little with the codes of filmmaking and is as factual as documentaries made today about wars fought by Occidental armies. I also used the conventions of war cinema to get the audience on board right away, so that I could later on pervert, divert, and play with codes and expectations to lead the spectator where I wanted to. And for this, I needed a rather classical dramaturgy. I was lucky to work with Thomas Bidegain on the script—for me, he is one of the best dramatists in France.

When you are a visual artist and you transition to filmmaking, there are several ways to do it. I wanted to make a film of cinema

and not a film made by an artist shown in theaters. And you can only achieve this through characters who encounter obstacles and come out transformed. It's been this way since the Greek myths and continues to be in Netflix and HBO shows today.

In the film, the fallibility of human vision is embodied by the thermal blanket, a camouflage that makes the soldiers “disappear” in the night. How did you come across that accessory?

For me, the blanket is part of the vocabulary of my work, and it kept coming back in several of my pieces. The first-aid blanket is the accessory that one uses after a natural disaster, a derailment, an attack, to preserve the suffering or sick body, and conceal the dead body. For me, there's an element of preservation that is, on the one hand, ultra-contemporary, but on the other, in my photograph *Deposition*, for instance, it is embedded in the iconography of religious and Byzantine painting, and the Italian primitives. The characters wrapped in the thermal blanket are like characters wrapped in some sort of sacred surface.

The character of the interpreter, played by Sâm Mirhosseini, is especially intriguing.

I think that the character was less interesting in the script, and it's the encounter with Sâm that made him really “real.” Sâm is not an actor, and he was supposed to play in life the role that I gave him in the film. So he was a legionnaire in the French Foreign Legion, and he was supposed to be going to Afghanistan as an interpreter for French soldiers. But he got into a fight with an officer before he left and they fired him from the army, so he didn't go. I met him a little after that and proposed this role to him. He injected his own experience and aggressivity into the role, and that created strange situations that added to the tension in the film.

You've said before that the expression “neither heaven nor earth” refers to a metaphysical space of disappearance in the film and

“For me, the totality of these contradictions [in religious texts] reflects all the richness, complexity, dangers, sublimity, and terrors of the human experience.”

comes from the Koran and the Bible. What about these religious texts attracts you and feeds into your work?

What interests me are the contradictions that are present from beginning to end. The Old Testament, the Book of Job, the Book of Kings, the Canticle of Canticles, contradict each other all the time. Trying to extract a sort of truth from these texts seems to me to be completely impossible. For me, the totality of these contradictions reflects all the richness, complexity, dangers, sublimity, and terrors of the human experience.

For this film in particular, I used the Book of Job, the story of a God enraged against man. For me, belief in God is not something that reassures me at all. From a mystical standpoint, the disappearance of the ego in the Sufi and Buddhist cultures is a benediction. The dissolution of the ego in the world is their ultimate goal. But from a more Hebraic standpoint, in the Book of Job for instance, it's the story of a God who strikes unforgivingly and hits animals and men, without exception. And so it is a God who is feared by men. The second text in the film, which is told by the interpreter, the Surat al-Kahf, is a Surat that's pretty famous in the Muslim world. When we watch the film in

the West, we say, “What is this strange story that speaks of this cavern?” When I show the film in the Muslim world, they're very surprised to see it in there because it's so close to them.

A sacred sentiment also emanates from the juxtaposition of electronic music and religious baroque music. Was the electronic dance scene, which resembles a sort of demoniac ritual, one of the first images that came to your mind?

Yes. You said “demoniac,” and actually in the script, I had written: “He dances alone as if chasing away demons.” For me, it's the moment in the film where the soldiers understand that weapons are useless to them, and so they have to go into war differently. They have a battle to fight, but it's not going to be the kind of fighting they are used to. The electronic dance scene in the film is very connected for me with the Sufi ceremony. It's a way of going into war and at the same time learning to live with the mystery. □

YONCA TALU is a filmmaker living in New York. She grew up in Istanbul and recently graduated from NYU Tisch.

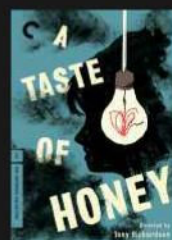
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THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD

CHINESE FILMMAKER WANG BING LETS US FEEL THE BARE
FACT OF EXISTENCE FOR PEOPLE CAUGHT IN TIME'S TIDE

By ANDREW CHAN



Crude Oil



Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks



'Til Madness Do Us Part. Below: Three Sisters



HOW DO YOU LOOK THE WORLD DEAD IN THE EYE? In the films of Chinese documentarian Wang Bing, time expands to such leviathan extremes—in the case of his video installation *Crude Oil* (08), a total of 14 hours—they make you feel as though you've been forced into a staring contest with reality. Even at their most static, his images vibrate with a corrosive, pent-up energy, intensified by the sense that much of the marginal, rural, and post-industrial life they capture is in the process of vanishing. Our looking becomes a kind of waiting, a Beckett-like suspension. After failing to realize his dreams of breaking into the film industry, Wang stumbled into the documentary field without the formal training that had characterized his country's previous generation of nonfiction filmmakers, even the most experimental and anti-establishment of whom had come up through the ranks of state-sanctioned TV journalism. It's this outsider status that gives Wang's works the feeling of having been foraged, and of having no concerns whatsoever for the audience's comfort. We emerge from his films having been flooded by the present tense, still unsure of how we might have best navigated its waters.

Even at their most static, his images vibrate with a corrosive, pent-up energy, intensified by the sense that much of the marginal, rural, and post-industrial life they capture is in the process of vanishing.

When Wang arrived on the international festival circuit in 2002 with *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks*, a nine-hour portrait of three declining state-owned factories in northeast China, his voracious documentation felt like the ideal redress to the scarcity of art cinema grappling with China's modern-day predicament. Here was a director intent on swallowing reality whole, whose tireless focus on life on the lowest rungs of the social ladder counteracted both the melodramatic excesses of Fifth Generation auteurs like Zhang Yimou and the propagandism of most Chinese nonfiction filmmaking up to that point. That the intimidating length of *West of the Tracks* seemed commensurate with the nation's unwieldiness as a subject obscured the obvious question of why any viewer would sign on to be held captive by such a mercilessly prolonged vision of industrial decay. In the context of the past decade of China's New Documentary Movement—an amorphous renaissance that, enabled by the widening availability of cheap digital cameras, has produced such masterful (and comparatively compact) protest films as Zhao Liang's *Petition*, Huang Weikai's *Disorder*, and Du Haibin's *1428* (all from 2009)—Wang's preeminence has become much easier to scrutinize.

And still no one has dared to make movies quite like his. Central to the experience of a Wang Bing film is the sense that one is being tested, but with Wang it's not simply a matter of time commitment or mental stamina. Just as challenging to endure is the

IN FOCUS: *Three Sisters* and *'Til Madness Do Us Part* will be available on home video this fall.

degree to which his eye seems inured to and undaunted by the rugged facts of ugliness, which emerge both as a feature of the unforgiving landscapes he favors and as an aesthetic tool with its own ambiguous moral force. True to the tradition of Direct Cinema (whose outsized influence on Chinese nonfiction filmmakers some scholars have traced to a trip Frederick Wiseman made to Asia in the early '90s), Wang strives for a kind of detached immersion. Yet his engagement with the old miserabilist themes of poverty, war, and disenfranchisement is unique in its tonal flatness, its scrupulous but often maddening lack of inflection. From their candid depictions of socioeconomic degradation to the brittle textures and sallow colors of their handheld DV visuals, his films demand to be recognized not for their bravery or social conscience, but for the queasiness they evoke.

THE HARDCRABBLE EXISTENCES THAT WANG chronicles call to mind “other half” art as aesthetically and temperamentally varied as Buñuel’s *Land Without Bread*, Pedro Costa’s Fontainhas films, and the photography of Lewis Hine and Jacob Riis. Much of his work, though, does not evince subversive rage or run-of-the-mill humanist empathy. In the case of his devastating recent film, *Til Madness Do Us Part* (13), what we feel most viscerally is the pitilessness and ruthlessness of his gaze. Set in a mental institution in a remote part of Yunnan province, where Wang was granted permission to shoot for two and a half months, this four-hour odyssey brings near-microscopic attention to a slow drip of chaos, making each shot land like a new round of punishment. The camera wanders the facility like a lab rat in a maze, darting between claustrophobic bedrooms, a corridor where male inmates sit on benches and look down through metal bars at the courtyard below, and a lounge where they watch soap operas and porn with the same glassy-eyed apathy. The cramped quarters force us into such unrelenting intimacy that we can taste the rust of the bed frames, the peeling paint on the walls, the fetid sheets.

Like its own variant of extreme cinema, *Madness* burrows beneath the skin, playing on our unease at partaking in a reality that the people on screen would flee if only they could. In occasional interviews, Wang has made clear his wish to capture the banal humanity of his subjects, perhaps to free them from the symbolism and sentimentality that privileged film-festival audiences so easily impose on the oppressed. As for prurient spectacle, while *Madness* is no *Shock Corridor* or *Snake Pit* or even a *Titicut Follies*, it is not above exploiting the grotesquery of mental illness in severe confinement, a condition that can’t help but resonate with what Foucault described as madness’s long-held metaphorical significance: “a difficult, hermetic, esoteric learning,” “the dizzying unreason of the world.” Wang courts our revulsion, with his grainy DV evoking the shit-smeared quality of a grunge music video. In the dank nocturnal gloom, the images get so blurry that, when a patient starts compulsively swatting at an insect on the wall, it’s hard to tell whether his victim is real or imagined. It’s when Wang insists on us witnessing naked inmates pissing into pails and engaging in vaguely sexual



Ta'ang

activity that we abandon the presumption that his observational transparency is ethically airtight.

The extended running time gives palpable form to how much Wang has wrested from his subjects, some of whom do not seem to have the wherewithal to have given their consent. Wang’s durational extremes do not just carry with them the weight of history and the inertia of the present; they also suggest that we as viewers might repay the gift of his subjects’ nakedness with our own sustained submission. In accordance with the material at hand, his temporal effects vary: in a film like *West of the Tracks*, where the inevitable shuttering of factories has grave implications for an entire community’s livelihood, we experience time as something to be staved off, while in *Madness*, the minutes collect as in a pool of standing water. Time in these films does not embrace, it provokes. It’s felt as sacrifice and labor. And the aim is to make us earn, as if such a thing were possible, the right to lay eyes on humiliations that are at once collectively borne and unbearably private.

Due in no small part to the children at its center, the exquisite *Three Sisters* (12)—made shortly before *Madness*—showcases a more tenderhearted Wang, for whom time is not so much a burden to be shouldered as an offering of silent solidarity. As we watch 10-year-old Yingying, 6-year-old Zhenzhen, and 4-year-old Fenfen make their way, day in and day out, across the mud-caked terrain of their village in Yunnan, sometimes herding farm animals, sometimes gathering potatoes or clumps of dung, we imagine our gaze as a kind of accompaniment, an illusory means of standing-beside. The severity of the sisters’ abandonment becomes clear when we learn that their mother has run away, and that their father is heading for the city to find work. Shifting between the dimly lit interiors of a lice-infested hut and the misty, muddy vistas outside, Wang often

Time in these films does not embrace, it provokes. It's felt as sacrifice and labor. The aim is to make us earn, as if such a thing were possible, the right to lay eyes on humiliations that are at once collectively borne and unbearably private.

trails behind the children, especially the smart and resourceful Yingying, with an almost canine faithfulness. A typical scene begins with him following the sisters intently, then letting them walk off into the distance.

In a rare gesture of open adoration, Wang plants his camera at an upward angle as Yingying sits on the edge of a hill, her figure framed against a startling blue sky. However briefly, she is empress of this inhospitable domain. In Wang's latest film, *Ta'ang* (16), a haunting look at Burmese ethnic-minority refugees traveling along the Chinese border, we get a similar but more fearsome kind of portraiture: a young girl stares directly at the camera as unexplained fires blaze behind her, her skin and clothing rendered monochrome in the night. While Wang has expressed a preference for the restless flow of time that film so convincingly simulates, his academic background in photography has clearly taught him the searing power of isolated images. He knows the emotional and moral tensions that can surface when the camera decides to put time on hold. Compare the aforementioned shots with the three-hour entirety of his masterpiece *Fengming: A Chinese Memoir* (07), which records an elderly woman's verbal account of the Cultural Revolution from an unvaried, coldly reverential distance, and you'll recognize a documentarian on whom the thorny complexities of proximity and stillness are not lost, and for whom the ongoing-ness of a single moment can hold its own terrifying allure.

FOR ALL THE COMPREHENSIVE SCOPE THEIR EPIC scales imply, Wang's films thwart our efforts at mastery. His camera is rooted in its singularity, its inability to occupy two spaces at once. We'll never see what the father in *Three Sisters* lives through in the city or what brings him so quickly back, though films that address the miseries of migrant labor, like Jia Zhangke's *The World* (04), Wang Chao's *Luxury Car* (06), and Lixin Fan's *Last Train Home* (09), may have already given us some idea. We'll never know what made his wife seek an escape from her fate, though we may already recognize familial separation as one of the costs of China's rage for capitalism. Such narrative elisions are also found in *Madness*, which relegates the inmates' backstories to the shadows, and in *Ta'ang*, which never coherently details the



Fengming, A Chinese Memoir

From their candid depictions of socioeconomic degradation to the brittle textures and sallow colors of their handheld DV visuals, his films demand to be recognized not for their bravery or social conscience, but for the queasiness they evoke.

political crisis the refugees are fleeing. Leaving the systemic causes of suffering unexamined allows Wang to claim political objectivity, and the absence of obvious dramas and climaxes makes it difficult to accuse him of fostering facile emotional identification.

The conclusions we're left to draw can be disturbing. Even in that affectionate shot of Yingying on the hill, Wang is exposing the human figure in its bare physicality, as an object. Its beauty exists alongside its endless capacity to be brutalized, reduced to an anonymous object on the horizon. Though it may not be fashionable in an age when more and more nonfiction

filmmakers are touting the agency and equal participation of their subjects, the power of Wang's cinema hinges on the paralyzing limits of perception, on our ultimate failure to comprehend the sight of a traumatized Other. In *Ta'ang*, which confronts a kind of social otherness that has long gone unexplored in Wang's work, and one that challenges myths of an ethnically homogeneous China isolated from the rest of the world, our eyes scan a barren field populated by flimsy tents and so many fragile, itinerant lives. The mind recoils at an empathy that can only fumble toward its target: while Wang intermittently zooms in on clusters of families, women carrying babies and speaking into cell phones, and children amusing themselves amid the desolation, he prefers to fill the screen with unidentifiable human figures, whose fears and desires and personalities will never come into focus.

This tacit admission of failure offers a necessary rebuke of social documentary's tendency to disguise pity as compassion, to fetishize mere looking as virtue. And while this strategy can sometimes feel like fatalistic indifference, it also fuels the sense of longing that occasionally breaks through the numbness Wang's films induce. In *Madness*, the camera's desire to reach beyond its limited purview is palpable: you can feel it in the way it gazes at Chinese New Year fireworks from behind bars, or peers across the courtyard to some shadowy action in a window. And you feel it when, in one of the film's more lucid depictions of interpersonal connection, an inmate's visit with his wife and son dissolves into a bout of domestic bickering that's downright comforting in its familiarity. She's downloaded a cheerful pop song for him; he repeatedly grunts at her to turn it off as she teases him for his surliness. Here is the tragicomedy of two family members groping for each other across their estrangement, reaching out and pulling back with the repetitiveness of ritual. Love hasn't spared anyone their helplessness, but its brief cameo in this godforsaken landscape is a reminder that this, too, is life. □

ANDREW CHAN has been contributing to FILM COMMENT since 2008.



SHOOTING THE MESSENGER

A CRITIC DISCOVERS THAT THE NONFICTION
FILM EXPERIMENTS OF TODAY READ A LOT LIKE THE
NEW JOURNALISM MOVEMENT OF THE 1960s AND 1970s

By ERIC HYNES

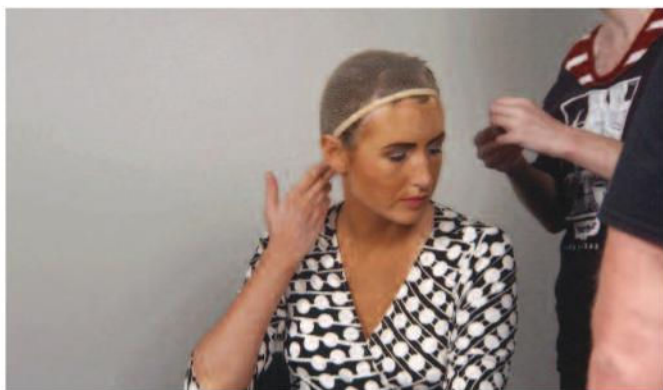


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We look for the sermon in the suicide, for the social or moral lesson in the murder of five. We interpret what we see, select the most workable of the multiple choices. We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the “ideas” with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience.

—JOAN DIDION, *The White Album*

KATE WALKS QUIETLY, THOUGH NOT UNNOTICEABLY, through a double threshold into the action area of the Take Aim Gun Range. Even in the early morning on a hot July weekday in strip-mall Sarasota there are shoppers and shooters around, and surely they’ve all at least taken note of the porcelain-skinned, almond-haired beauty with the blue, blue eyes wearing the light blue, blue jeans and loose-fitting pale blouse. Kate puts on the bulky noise-canceling headphones, looking not unlike she might when insouciantly grooving on the New York City subway, then proceeds to fire off a round, upending what you’d expect from the porcelain skin and blue eyes and what-am-I-even-doing-here look on her face. Or maybe it’s a look of agitation. Or maybe she’s nervous. Or maybe there’s no real information on her face or in her non-Floridian-in-90-degree-June attire. She plugs crisp holes into the red circle heart repeatedly of the faceless figure on the generic paper target 10 yards away. Cool, calm, coldhearted, precise. Bull’s-eye. Even through two



IN FOCUS: *Kate Plays Christine* opens in August.

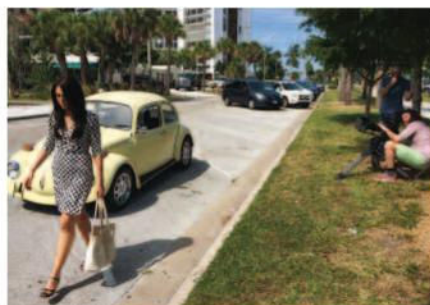
walls of thick glass, the violence splits silence and sustains.

While Kate Lyn Sheil takes aim with a revolver, Sean Price Williams takes aim at Kate with a Sony PXW-FS7 XDCAM, his six-foot-three-inch-tall vantage and zoom lens giving him a clear view over Kate’s shoulder at the holes she’s directing into the bull’s-eye, the importance of which is currently unclear, though now that she’s proven so adept—unforeseen and unplanned and caught on camera—it’s likely to be exploited, for whatever it’s worth, for whatever worth can be given, in the edit. I know this because the editor, Robert Greene, who is also the director, who is also recording sound, is standing behind Sean and looking pleased, leaning in to confirm *did we get that?* It’s one moment among many this morning, and in this film production, that’s both captured and made, coincidental and constructed, actual and virtual. The filmmakers haven’t happened upon the Take Aim Gun Range—it was found by a hyperactive local fixer named “Location” Larry Weisbaum (one

New Journalism was an ethos and attitude far more than it was a genre, a density of fresh voices more than it was an entirely new song.

of the many Noo Yawk–accented transplants that make Sarasota seem less than a world away from the Metropolis-based crew). Having originally scheduled the shoot for two days later, and at a different strip-mall spot in town, the film’s on-the-ground producer, Bennett Elliott, slotted it before the next item on today’s call sheet, “Kate watches more violent videos”—which would transpire, after a pleasant Thai lunch, in the single-story bungalow by Lido Beach that’s doubling as crew crash pad and active film set. Meanwhile, Kate’s doubling as a person in a West Florida gun range and an actress playing a person in a West Florida gun range; Sean’s doubling as creator and capturer; Robert’s doubling as puppeteer and provocateur; and all the while I’m doubling as embedded journalist and friend of the filmmaker with too much time on his hands.

The objective and the subjective don’t cancel each other out here so much as they lie together, entwined and in combat, coterminous and mutually mystified. We’re on location for *Kate Plays Christine*, Greene’s documentary about a feeble re-creation and mostly fruitless investigation of the largely unremarkable life of a deceased woman nobody seems to remember, Christine Chubbuck. The Sarasota-based anchorwoman killed herself on camera 42 years ago this July 15; it’s an event that eerily echoed with



Paddy Chayevsky's script for *Network* but thus far has inspired mostly headshakes and blank stares from the locals. Though the broadcast was recorded that morning, the tape hasn't been seen publicly since, leaving Greene with only a single *Washington Post* feature story, written by Sally Quinn the month after Chubbuck's death, upon which to base his film. Yet it's this dearth of information that seems to motivate him—not for rectifying, but rather for dwelling upon. Chubbuck is a blank slate that Greene is elaborately, often mystifyingly trying *not* to mark up.

After she disappears into the gun-range restroom, Kate reemerges as a woman with jet-black hair and thickened eyebrows and a chambray button-up tucked into tight, high-waisted Jordaches, the '70s-era, wig-enhanced costume of Chubbuck, who took her own life with a gun much like the one Kate's holding right now. Time and space are disoriented, or at least that's the moment's purplish elevator pitch—conjuring a long-dead local woman's harrowing story, a contrived phantasmagoria to echo the actual. And yet that's still Kate Lyn Sheil in a wig. And yet to the yet, that's still live ammunition in the gun. Kate may be an actress dolled up in an idea (a yet to the yet's yet), but she's not firing blanks, and she's not missing the target. She takes pointers from the kind, pleasantly unfazed house expert, raises the pistol, and drills the bull's-eye from 10 yards out. Kate—as Christine but with a real revolver—is about a foot and a half, and one quick reflex, from doing the undoable that brought us all here, from sending us into paroxysms of morbid wonder and conjecture, from was it an impulse or a plan, from was it a professional rejection or a boyfriend thing, from was it the blues or the black chasm of nothingness, from what was that look on her face and what did she say and do just before. We'd manufacture a sermon for her suicide, much as Chubbuck's death spoke of the sensationalism of the media, or the sadness of a single, virginal 30-year-old woman, but deep down I would know, from Kate's poker face, from the fact that 10 minutes ago we were chatting about classic rock in the back of a minivan, from the fact that we barely know each other and have never talked about what moves and frustrates and haunts us, that I would never know.

Eyeing Kate and Sean and Robert and the disclaimer that "Location" Larry has posted on the wall, a customer asks what this is all about. "Some kind of documentary," the man behind the counter says. "I don't know what it's for."

Reality, or more accurately a reckoning with reality, dictates form.

[2]

“HOW CAN YOU HAVE A MOVEMENT WHEN NO ONE KNOWS what that movement represents? Is New Journalism the participatory gonzo journalism of Hunter S. Thompson? Jimmy Breslin's impressionistic rogue's tales? Tom Wolfe's jittery gyroscopic prose?” Marc Weingarten asks in his book *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight*. New Journalism was all of these, of course, and that lack of formal or stylistic definition both gave it power and dulled it. It was an ethos and attitude far more than it was a genre, a density of fresh voices more than it was an entirely new song. Wolfe coined the term in 1973, which was at least a decade after some of its most famous writers had already been working uncoined, and still at the beginning of the intra-professional ethical fights that would rage for decades hence.

The same holds for the current wave of nonfiction filmmakers, who don't even have a mutually agreed upon, inadequately descriptive term to pin on themselves. (Creative Nonfiction? Cinematic Nonfiction? Hybrid Documentary? Chimeric Nonfiction? Formalist Friskies?) Are Bill and Turner Ross part of the movement? Is Penny Lane? Is Margaret Brown? Is Michal Marczak? Yes to these? Okay, well what about Errol Morris or Jean-Luc Godard, each at least a generation older than the others, each scarred from previous historical battles over form? Wolfe et al openly mocked *The New Yorker* in the early 1960s, and yet there's a clear line from two of the magazine's greatest writers, John Hersey and Lillian Ross, to New Journalists like Truman Capote and Grover Lewis. Similarly, there's a line from the makers of Direct Cinema (D.A. Pennebaker, the Maysles Brothers), First Person documentary (Jonas Mekas, Ed Pincus), and late-'60s hybrid films (by William Greaves, David Hoffman, Peter Whitehead) to today's flowering of impulses and genres.

“It's journalism that reads like fiction and rings with the truth of reported fact,” is how Weingarten ultimately pegs New Journalism, but even that's too specific, too delineating. Some of the best works of that era don't actually read like fiction—they read like something *else*, as they ought to. Authors become characters (Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*, Joan Didion in *The White Album*), reporters interrogate and implicate themselves (Gay Talese in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*), subjectivity overtakes objectivity (Hunter S. Thompson, famously), and perspective shifts

from third to first to second person (Wolfe, regularly), none of it aping fiction but rather testing the elasticity of nonfiction. As it happened the form could handle it. Which was lucky, because the creeping unfamiliarity of the world, as Didion would masterfully explore, certainly seemed to demand it.

Nonfiction as searching, nonfiction as continually becoming, writing and films that are intentionally and strenuously not one thing, often call to mind the William H. Gass essay, title, and idea “Finding a Form.” The gerund makes it active. It’s always in process. It’s never definitely “found.” In documentary, endeavoring to find a form takes truth and experience seriously enough to want to feel around for the right mode of expression, and ideally with the humility, or self-awareness, to know that the chosen mode won’t ever be a perfect seal. As a writer reaches for a word, or a metaphor, to articulate an observation, the filmmaker contemplates a shot, an angle, an apt or evocative sequence of shots within a work filled with carefully chosen and constructed sequences. They select subjects—not the same as casting actors, though also not wholly different, and to a similar functional end—to represent communities, setpieces to represent ways of being, dramas supposing generalities. Wolfe slides into sentence fragments, privileging rhythm and voice to get at the cacophony of the event and the culture of the room; with *Leviathan* (12), Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel offer only visual and audio fragments, extended shots and limited perspective to get at the culture of a very particular place. Grover Lewis writes extended celebrity profiles constructed almost entirely from quotes; ditto Asif Kapadia with *Senna* (10) and Stevan Riley with *Listen to Me Marlon* (15). Norman Mailer emits a torrent of insight and ego, demonstratively devouring ideas and methods to conflate the objective with the subjective; Victor Kossakovsky, with *Vivan las Antipodas!* (11), spans the globe to draw parallels between societies and peoples, his ambitions and bombast accommodated by the epic canvas.

Within all of that thought and care devoted to form, within the worrying over the shape and matter of film, is a desire to more deeply and sincerely grapple with the real world. Reality, or more accurately a reckoning with reality, dictates form.



[3]

It has long been my belief that realism is fantastic, that the dreams and drives of modern Americans, if rendered with a depth of understanding and accuracy, can be as socially significant and as historically useful as the fictional lives and situations created by playwrights and novelists... By writing about real people whose lives are touched by the issues of our time, and by using the narrative techniques of fiction in telling their stories, I have attempted to make comprehensible the complexity, and sometimes the hypocrisy, of the society in which we live.

—GAY TALESE, *Thy Neighbor's Wife*

WITH EYES DILATED BEHIND GRANDPA GLASSES, KATE in the back of the boat, where a small canopy offers a slice of shade as the crew zigzags around the Sarasota harbor. Every once in a while Sean steals a shot of her, but there’s no real directive on this trip, no scene to play—just another chance to establish place, provide atmosphere, put the character in another isolating location. She’s kind of zoning out at the moment, thinking about the TV shoot in Georgia she has to start right after this one ends. At least she’ll have an apartment to herself for those weeks. At least her bedroom won’t be a live set.

She doesn’t need contacts—her vision is actually perfect. But what will it be like to look in the mirror and see brown eyes? Will she feel more like Christine? Is that even the expectation, and would that even be helpful to the film? They’ve known each other since the Kim’s Video days, but Kate’s never really worked on a film with Robert before. He doesn’t really know how to direct her, but that isn’t surprising considering he’s only made documentaries, and anyway it’s typical of most of the independent filmmakers she’s worked with over the years. They expect you to do all the work. They say collaboration, but what they mean is: make decisions for me. They say improvise, but it’s just because they don’t really know what they want. At least Robert has strong, clear ideas of what the film is, and his being hands-off makes sense with the idea of this as a documentary. So far it’s given her a lot of freedom—freedom to not feel like she has to supply the magic, freedom she’s currently using to just be, hang back, see how it develops. She’s reluctant to make the kinds of strong choices that would dictate the course of the film, that would lock her character—the one that’s synonymous with herself—into a mold she’d have to keep filling. It’s not like there’s a wrong way to play the part, but it would be easier if there were.

[4]

SO MANY DOCUMENTARIES, ESPECIALLY AMERICAN documentaries, have stuffed the messiness of real experience into familiar boxes—the often maligned “talking head” approach, the underdog or big competition tale, the rag-tag community portrait, the choir-preaching leftist propaganda, the incorporation of *verité* as accent rather than encompassing



ethic. Isn't that what the creative *nonfictionistas* are truly rebelling against, and not the rigors of reporting, or the respecting of a world beyond the canvas? You can call your work by whatever name you'd like. Just maybe don't discard journalism unnecessarily, or lightly. If nothing else, New Journalism proved that the discipline and profession of journalism is a big enough boat to contain multitudes.

Today many documentary filmmakers are fighting, at a high and sophisticated level, against the idea that they're mere journalists with video cameras, and for the idea that they're artistic equals of filmmakers working with scripts and actors and make believe. They're antagonistic toward issue-propelled projects, impact as an active verb, raggedness as shorthand for real, formal sobriety as being ethical. For inspiration they leap back to the Brechtian honesty of Jean Rouch; the expressive, empathetic camera of Albert and David Maysles; the time-funneling docu-novels of Frederick Wiseman; the kaleidoscopic audacity of Dziga Vertov; and fiction.

These reclamations have pointedly little to do with nonfiction as a journalistic enterprise—even if journalism remains in play. Until he was installed at the University of Missouri's Murray Center for Documentary Journalism last year, Greene would speak frequently and witheringly about the fallacies of approaching nonfiction filmmaking journalistically. "I don't want my films called 'journalism,'" he once told a reporter. "There's too many decisions made for story and cinematic purposes in the best non-fiction films for them to be considered 'journalism.'" Echoing that is Joshua Oppenheimer (*The Act of Killing*), who said, "I don't think of myself as a journalist; I have no training in journalism," and furthermore that journalistic expectations represent "one of

the biggest threats to nonfiction cinema as an art." Predictably, Werner Herzog lowers the boom further: "Documentary film must divorce itself from journalism."

Sometimes the distancing from journalism has been one of type, other times of degrees. But as this century has advanced, the rallying cry has been on behalf of documentary as an art form. And as a result, for different-minded filmmakers, some of whom have spent decades approaching the craft differently—whether they're motivated by politics, social justice, investigative or reportorial impulses—such "we play by different rules" rhetoric can seem wayward, presumptuous, and lazy.

Yet removed from recent history, from the distinct economies of broadcasting and filmmaking, from perceptions and misperceptions around visual media, and, most crucially, from the semantic and widespread conflation of journalism with news reporting, there's a tantalizing precedent for formally experimental nonfiction that's still rooted in the rigors of reportage, as well as for the discussion around it.

[5]

Weighing the book in my hand, I try to weight it in my mind as well—objectively, if possible. The narrative is sometimes crude, more often tasteless, and always bitter as distilled gall. But it is true—true to the bone-and-gristle life in this stricken, sepia-colored tag-end of nowhere. So it goes in the short-grass country. It's hardly a thought to warm your hands over, but it occurs to me that I've been in Archer City only a scant few hours, and like that daughter's mother in Thalia, I'm already a little sick of it, my own self.

—GROVER LEWIS,

Splendor in the Short Grass: The Making of The Last Picture Show



I REMEMBER STANDING IN CHRISTINE CHUBBUCK'S HOUSE, wondering what I was supposed to feel. After days of fruitless searches throughout the Sarasota area for people who knew her, of shoulder shrugs passing as interviews, we made our way to the home that she'd shared with her mother and brother at the time of her death. Others had lived there in the 41 years since, but somehow it was vacant at that time, and "Location" Larry scored a set of keys.

The crew was at the back of the house, shooting Kate's emergence from the sliding doors of the breezeway to the windy vista

of the ocean, which was about 10 yards and a single-story staircase from the house. While Kate toured the grounds for both the camera and her character work, I kept clear of Sean's shots, poking around and taking my own pictures. What I found was actually too metaphorically rich: the house was gutted. Some of the electrical fixtures had been stripped. There were holes in a lot of the walls and ceilings, flooring missing in what seemed like the master bedroom. It felt haunted, but not necessarily by Christine. In fact there was nothing in that house to suggest her, or anyone for that matter. There was an absence of any particular absence. Yet we were officially closer to Christine than we'd ever been. A woman who once killed herself once lived here, and some people from New York worked hard to come to Sarasota to get to this place. That was the story. A story still searching for a story.

I was certainly still searching for mine. Over the previous years I'd grown close to Robert Greene, too close to write about his work in any normal journalistic capacity—and yet close enough to see things most don't get to see, close enough to observe a process unconventional enough to merit an unconventional journalistic

There's a tantalizing precedent for formally experimental nonfiction that's still rooted in the rigors of reportage, as well as for the discussion around it.

approach. Days into it, I still didn't know what they were making; I still didn't know if any of this was going to work, if it ever could work. The not knowing was intriguing. The not knowing could also be stifling. Meanwhile I played a 1970s TV cameraman in a reenactment scene, I hauled equipment, I made whiskey and Cokes for the crew, and I scribbled in a reporter's notebook, as much for show as for the record. I often couldn't tell if I was playing at being a journalist, or playing at being the friend. Both sounded about right, and both felt wrong.

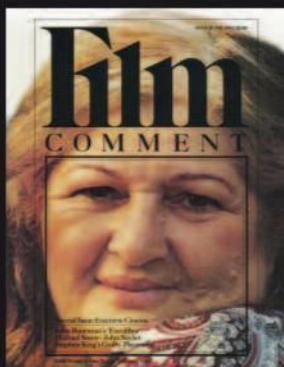
Yet in the grim, windowless interior bathroom of the house, bafflingly laid out and dominated by a *Lady of Shanghai*-esque array of mirrors, in the shock of glancing at myself in that lifeless house shuttered from the sea, in this banal sense of meaninglessness at the end of this dogged search for meaning, I did feel something, and something to do with Christine Chubbuck, whoever she was. Not the sort of thing you'd be able to articulate in a normal story. Not the sort of thing for which there's proof. Or testimonials. Or an explanation. Or a cure. Yet something that's always there. The who, the what, the where, the why without answer. The real ghost. The idea for which we try to find images. The feeling for which we try to find words. All that finding may be inelegant. But it is true. □

ERIC HYNES is a journalist and critic, and associate film curator at Museum of the Moving Image in New York.

filmcomment

AT THE HEART OF FILM CULTURE FOR OVER 50 YEARS

“



WHEN EDITH MASSEY WAS ON THE COVER OF FILM COMMENT IN 1981, I REACHED THE PINNACLE OF IRONIC DELIGHT IN MY CAREER. IT'S BEEN DOWNHILL EVER SINCE.

— JOHN WATERS

”

TO BUY ANY ISSUE FROM 1963 TO 2016, GO TO FILMCOMMENT.COM/SHOP



Alaya



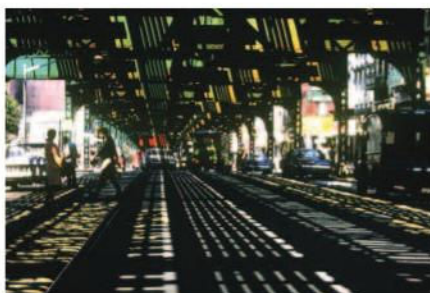
Arbor Vitae



August and After



February



Hours for Jerome



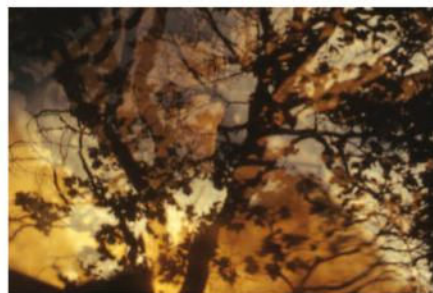
Hours for Jerome Part 2



Pneuma



Prelude



The Return



Spring



Summer



Threnody

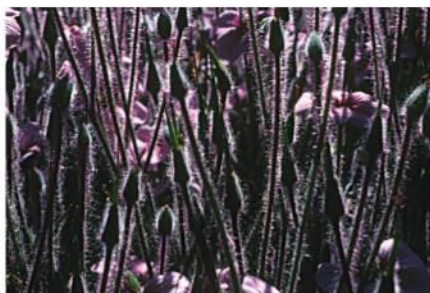
HEAVENLY HOST

FOR MORE THAN 50 YEARS, NATHANIEL DORSKY HAS BEEN WELCOMING VIEWERS INTO A GRACIOUS EMPIRE OF LIGHT

by MAX NELSON



Avraham



Compline



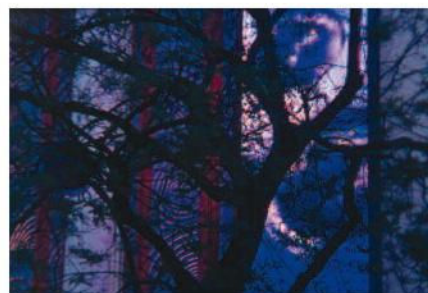
A Fall Trip Home



Intimations



Love's Refrain



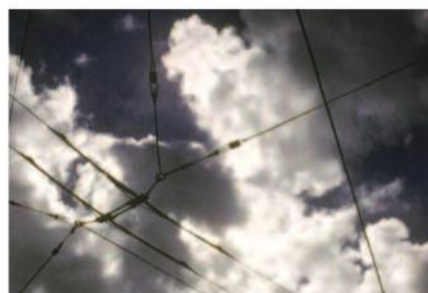
Pastourelle



Sarabande



Song



Song and Solitude



Triste



Variations



The Visitation

N

ATHANIEL DORSKY HAS A TENDENCY, DURING THE TALKBACKS THAT OFTEN FOLLOW screenings of his short films, to answer a question with a second one: "What do you think?" "How did that shot seem to you?" Audience Q&As more often fit the description Dorsky used for bad conversation in his 2003 book *Devotional Cinema*—"an exhausting exchange of self-confirming, predigested concepts"—and his way of running them helps suggest what makes him such a distinctive, unorthodox filmmaker. Dorsky often compares his cinematic methods to the work of keeping up a conversation. Both involve the preservation of delicate equilibriums and the sustaining of carefully chosen tones. Both have the potential, as Dorsky wrote in the same passage, "to be balanced or

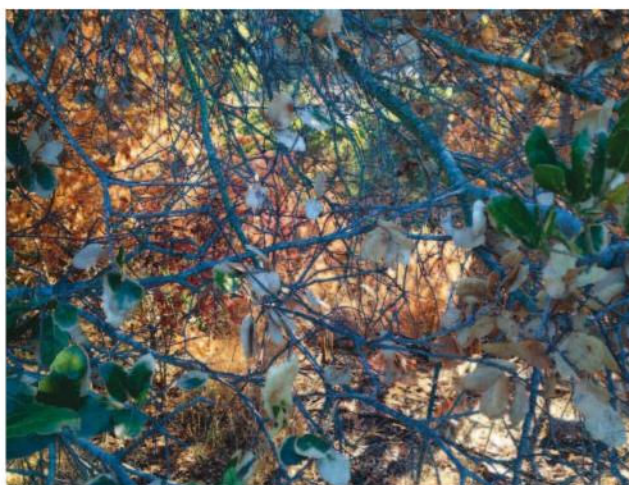
unbalanced,” and both involve handling people with graciousness and care.

It's always been one of Dorsky's primary concerns as a filmmaker to “be a good host,” as he has put it. Across his works, no individual image can call attention to itself too loudly or recede too indistinctly into the whole. No excess of attention can be directed toward either the urban bustle of San Francisco, where Dorsky lives and works, or the city's bucolic suburbs, where he often shoots. To watch nearly any Dorsky film is to be guided through a pattern of hushed, suspended, illuminated visions: light emerging through curtains and bending through glass; light deflected by the surfaces of tables and the bodies of cars; light caught by fabric; light distorted as it passes through water, windows, optical filters, or translucent rocks; light moving across faces, shoulders, and hair; light glittering across the surface of a receding tide; light striking jewels and strings of beads; moonlight muffled and darkened by clouds; sunlight fringing buds and shoots of grass. In their rhythms, textures, and distributions of light, these are unfailingly courteous films—experiments in how hospitable and accommodating moving images can be.

The nine 16mm films Dorsky made before he finished *Triste* (96) vary widely in format and style. The 23 films he's released since are no less tonally diverse, but they have undeniable common ground. These later works are all silent; most hover around 20 minutes in length. (At the outskirts are *Arbor Vitae*, made between 1999 and 2000, at 28 minutes, and 2010's *Aubade*, at just under 12.) They all move at 18 frames per second, which Dorsky has variably called “silent speed” and “sacred speed.” Certain subjects catch Dorsky's eye repeatedly in the films he's made since *Triste*: transparent, reflective surfaces like windows or glass doors; bodies of freshwater; storefront

IN FOCUS: *Nathaniel Dorsky's latest short film, Autumn, is expected to premiere in the fall.*

displays; meadows in bloom; café patrons, commuters, and people in the street; amateur sports games; cats; tree branches; cloud formations; birds. Sometimes, he'll introduce a radically foreign object into his films: a buttressed, torchlit temple pool in *Spring* (13); a pod-like room that resembles the interior of a space shuttle in *Pastourelle* (10). And yet even when he returns to a familiar image, Dorsky never films anything exactly the same way twice. A shot in *Variations* (92-98) of the moon emerging from behind a layer of cloud carries a radically different tonal charge than does a much tighter shot of the same subject



Autumn

Watch enough of his films, and it's easy to lose your tolerance for movies that treat their viewers' receptivity as an inexhaustible resource—films that bully, rant, aggress, or lapse into monologue.

in *The Visitation* (02), in which the moon's emergence registers less as a softening, consoling presence than as a threatening omen. Both suggest different states of mind than the shot midway through *Threnody* (04) of the moon reflected in a storefront window over a mannequin's shrouded eye, or the shots of moonlit clouds that pile on one another breathlessly in the last seconds of *Compline* (09). When the moon appears in *Summer* (13),

it's sheathed in clouds that fly across the screen in time-lapse; when it enters *Hours for Jerome* (66-70/82), one of his earliest, it's as a flickering, latticed orb that looks at first glance like a patch of light seen through a circular viewfinder.

Each of Dorsky's shots can be taken as a reaction against the one before it. Overpowering images like the vision of the receding tide near the end of *The Visitation* or the virtuosic first shot of *Song* (13), in which a reflected frame-within-the-frame literally flies into full view at the closing of a door, have to be buffered by humbler shots of people, animals, or plants, or by murkier, blurrier shots that make fewer demands on the eye. The concluding sequence of *Song and Solitude* (05-06), for instance, shows a low-contrast image of a cat gazing out of a window; a vertiginous close-up of a preening mannequin in a boutique display lit by shimmering green reflections; a casual glimpse of birds pecking at an unfinished lunch; a dim image of tree branches swaying against a dusk sky; and a flurry of quick, high-exposure shots of white almond blossoms quivering in the wind. One

imagines Dorsky deciding that the image of the mannequin and the subsequent volley of shots needed to be separated by an image less lofty and ethereal (the hungry birds), and then cushioned by a more neutral shot on which the eye could rest (the branches). Dorsky has referred to cuts as “refreshments of receptivity.” Watch enough of his films, and it's easy to lose your tolerance for movies that treat their viewers' receptivity as an inexhaustible resource—films that bully, rant, aggress, or lapse into monologue.

BORN IN 1943, DORSKY MADE HIS first films in Millburn, the New Jersey town where he grew up. As a 21-year-old, recently out gay man, he left Antioch College after a year to live in New York and take classes at NYU's film school. Photos of Dorsky as a teenager show him already wearing light meters and visiting camera shops, and when he

moved to the city he immersed himself in its thriving underground film scene. Slavko Vorkapich was giving a series of influential lectures at MoMA; Stan Brakhage was presenting *Dog Star Man* volume by volume; Gregory Markopoulos, Jack Smith, and George Kuchar were premiering films that toyed mischievously with their viewers' expectations about aesthetics and sexuality.

It was under these influences that Dorsky made his first three films between 1964 and 1965. The images he took on his visits to Millburn—football games, flags hung in yards, old men playing badminton at an afternoon picnic—seemed to come from the perspective of a lost visitor or a wandering ghost. Like Dorsky's later movies, *Ingreen* and *A Fall Trip Home* (both 64) are rich with shots of windswept flowers and grass, discreetly sensual images of the male body, and scenes of quotidian human activity captured from a muffling remove. What Dorsky would most radically disavow after making these films were their ominous soundtracks and their overt psychologizing. These were films explicitly about what it was like to grow up gay in an inhospitable place (one shot in *Ingreen* shows a young man falling at the knees of a menacing father figure in the middle of a field), and Dorsky wasn't well suited to their confessional mode. By the time he made *Summerwind* (65), he was leaving his own psychological states unstated, letting them come through in the rhythm and tone of the images themselves.

The day after *Ingreen* premiered at the Washington Square Gallery, Markopoulos took his younger roommate, Jerome Hiler, to meet Dorsky at the offices of the Film-makers' Co-op. Hiler and Dorsky became fast friends, then romantic partners and close artistic collaborators. By 1967, the two of them were living together in a small cottage off New Jersey's Lake Owassa. Four years later, they left New York for San Francisco, where they soon settled permanently after an unhappy stay in L.A. to help write, shoot, and produce an exploitation

film called *Revenge of the Cheerleaders*. Dorsky found more commercial editing jobs akin to the work he'd done in New York and started collecting bargain-priced, outdated film stocks.

One evening in 1978, he stumbled upon his decade-old footage from New York and Lake Owassa. He spent the next four years stitching the half-edited fragments into *Hours for Jerome* (82), a 45-minute film split into two parts and four seasonal movements. In the movie's first minutes, a sliver of sunlight glimpsed through a forest canopy slowly widens until it nearly fills the screen, and there's an impression



Nathaniel Dorsky

Dorsky has become so palpably relaxed with his materials and so accomplished at subtly manipulating light and color that his movies have shed their last elements of self-consciousness or strain.

throughout the film of long-suppressed memories and associations surging into clarity: images of the frayed hem of Hiler's jeans rustling as his hands move across his shoes; glimpses of strangers fixing dinner in brightly lit apartments; records of rainy commutes. With the distance of 10 years, Dorsky could weave the original film's more violent passages—several scenes of New York passersby are punctuated with full-screen flashes of aggressive, zigzagging

lines—into a pattern that also includes affectionate portraits of strangers and friends, tender interludes, and mischievous juxtapositions.

He wouldn't make another such film for 14 years. Instead, for the rest of the '80s, he put himself through a rigorous set of exercises to acquaint himself with the film stocks—Gevaert, Ilford, Dynachrome—he'd accumulated. *Pneuma* (77-83) was assembled by hand on an optical printer from irregular scraps of outdated color reversal stock. Each image is an expanse of a single dominant color strewn with enlarged film grains that pinwheel in place and cascade across the screen, not unlike the grains of sand that run down inclines or collapse en masse in extreme close-up throughout *Alaya* (76-87), which Dorsky made during this period in Death Valley and Cape Cod.

In *17 Reasons Why* (85-87), Dorsky took more liberties with the materials he'd been studying. He created it with Regular 8mm, a rarely used double-strip format usually split down the middle in processing. When Dorsky asked that the film go unsplit, the resulting strip showed up projected as a string of four-chambered images—two parallel strands of two frames each. The images on each of those frames—rivers, lilies, parade floats, stained and blown glass—would recur in Dorsky's later works, but the tempo at which they move here is unusually quick and frenetic. Watching the film, you only take a breath at the last shot: a cluster of trees swaying at dusk.

As he made these movies, Dorsky was accumulating the footage that would become *Triste*. He edited it on the assumption that a movie's images had to be carefully balanced, arranged in keeping with their density, color, texture, and weight. The shots in *Triste* range from the reverent (hundreds of leaves rustling together against a chapel wall) to the casual (Hiler preparing a meal in the couple's shared kitchen), the precious (an infant's face speckled with refracted sunlight) to the ponderous (another tree branch swaying in

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the wind after dusk). As they accumulate, every shot gives what it can—its ballasting heaviness, its loosening intimacy, its disruptive violence, its diverting levity, its startling virtuosity—to the creation of a melody that develops and deepens over the course of the film. *Triste* showed Dorsky trying to purge himself of any remnants of self-consciousness, posturing, or artifice. For its showy, black-and-white passages, Dorsky once wryly called it “my last avant-garde film.”

“WHEN I FIRST ENCOUNTERED avant-garde films in the early 1960s,” Dorsky wrote near the start of *Devotional Cinema*, “I began to observe that there was a concordance between film and our human metabolism, and to see that this concordance was a fertile ground for expression, a basis for exploring a language intrinsic to film.” Dorsky’s writings can be cryptic, but the “concordance” they describe is such a basic fact of moviegoing it often goes unmentioned—that certain arrangements of images jerk their viewers rudely around whereas others seem to synchronize harmoniously with their viewers’ internal rhythms. Dorsky’s editing is a matter of hitting on the timings that will seem most accommodating and least interruptive to an actual, embodied, exhaustible person. His cuts are based on what audiences will best be able to process, just as his choice of what to shoot depends in part on what a given set of physical film materials will best capture. The relatively abstract *Sarabande* (08) and *Compline* abound in deep purples and blues, linger on sparkling patterns of light, and depend on fine gradations of shadow because Dorsky wanted, with the last of his discontinued Kodachrome, to show what only that stock could do. In more recent films like *February* and *Avraham* (both 14), Dorsky relied increasingly on flickering effects and sudden aperture changes because the color negative stock with which he works now is thinner and less expressive (“wimpier,” as he has put it) than Kodachrome, but handles extreme brightness and darkness well.

Since *Triste*, Dorsky has been steadily isolating certain of his habits and moods and magnifying them to the exclusion of

other ones, often in response to specific events. *Song and Solitude* was made in tribute to Dorsky’s friend Susan Vigil, who was undergoing cancer treatments during the period when Dorsky showed her the film’s weekly rushes. *Threnody* was made shortly after the death of Stan Brakhage, a deep influence for Dorsky and a close friend; *August and After* in memory of George Kuchar and Carla Liss; *The Visitation* over the course of a week in Toronto immediately after 9/11. These are some of Dorsky’s most somber films. He made *Variations*, *Arbor Vitae*, and *Love’s Refrain* (00-01), three of his brightest and most buoyant, as he was recovering from a severe concussion and, as he has put it, rediscovering the world.

For all their variations in mood, these films share an unmistakable orientation to the worlds they depict. Dorsky always keeps a more or less wide buffer zone between his camera and his subjects. In *The Return* (11), a shot of two women in a café cuts off the top of their heads, leaving only their eagerly gesticulating bodies; in a number of the shots of San Francisco pedestrians that fill *Song*, it’s only revealed midway through that we’re looking at the people in question through a window, a door, or a screen. In one post-screening discussion, Dorsky described these nonintrusive points of view as the ones with enough “nobility and dignity” to “allow the audience to have the same relationship to the screen that I’m having to the camera.” If the filmmaker *did* too much, if he seemed like a purposeful agent rather than a passive floating consciousness, he would break whatever immersion the audience has in the world of the screen. Viewers would sense his fiddling, manipulative presence behind the images;

It’s as if in his films from the early 2000s Dorsky has become more comfortable calling attention to the methods behind his films’ dazzling displays—exposing the whimsical tweaks and tunings on which he’s always relied to achieve his effects.

“the hand of the filmmaker,” in a phrase Dorsky often uses, would have broken in.

One might reply that viewers are made of harder stuff than such phrases suggest, and that we sometimes don't mind a filmmaker's hand breaking into a movie and pushing us around. But if Dorsky's concern for his viewers makes him unusually cautious, he still finds ways to startle and surprise. One of his regular moves is to usher his viewers into sudden, direct involvement with other people—the image in *Love's Refrain* of a hairless, bedridden elderly man gazing into the camera with a faint grin; the frankly erotic passage in *The Visitation* of a toned man splashing water over his nude torso; the succession of shadowy close-up portraits midway through *Intimations* (15)—or into moments of quiet domestic intimacy with Hiler, who appears across these films like a watchful, benevolent presence.

Dorsky's most recent films are among his loosest and most casual. The aperture adjustments and blurrings of focus Dorsky once left in the cutting room have become some of his central expressive tools. When he captures a cluster of cherry blossoms in *February*, an overcast night sky in *Avraham*, or a blood-red flower in *Prelude* (15), he keeps brightening and dimming the shot, playing at letting in more and less light, like a pianist alternating quickly between two notes. In Dorsky's films from the early 2000s, everything in the shot tended to be crisp, glistening, and focused; recently, he's started letting fuzzy, ill-defined objects sway in the extreme foreground of his shots or glitter suggestively in the far background. It's as if he has become more comfortable calling attention to the methods behind his films' dazzling displays—exposing the whimsical tweaks and tunings on which he's always relied to achieve his effects.

This is a welcome development. Dorsky's impulse to anticipate his viewers' needs—to palliate, minister to, heal, and relax his audience—has always pushed him to suppress indulgent habits and make tighter, more potent movies. But it has also sometimes limited his freedom of movement and made him unwilling to risk sudden, unexpected gestures that might tear the fabric of the viewer's experience. That he now seems less worried

about “breaking in” to the movie or showing his hand as a filmmaker has made his works not less immersive but friendlier and more inviting. He's become so palpably relaxed with his materials and so accomplished at subtly manipulating light and color that his movies have shed their last elements of self-consciousness or strain.

The first half of his new film, *Autumn*, surveys much of what Dorsky has made in the past two decades. Its first minute—a gauzy dance of pearly, pale yellows and pinks—recalls the similarly abstract beginning of *Triste*. The shots of fall foliage that follow, with their aperture adjustments and unfocused foregrounds, could have come from *Prelude* or *Avraham*, and the subsequent, playful shots of department-store displays and streets in San Francisco's Chinatown wouldn't have seemed out of place in *Song and Solitude*. Then, after about 15 minutes, we are ushered somewhere else—into an almost wholly abstract space of light leaks and lens flares, magnified water droplets and narrow threads of blue light, color formations that look like patterned doilies passing in and out of alignment, and jewel-like floating octagons of bright green, red, and gold.

The movie ends on two familiar, reassuring shots of a cluster of red flowers, but we're left marveling at what the previous 10 minutes showed. Where did these images come from? How did Dorsky capture them? What are they *of*? With this passage, Dorsky has led us into new and disorienting territory. Watching it makes you think that his trust in his viewers—their tolerance for abstraction and mystery and surprise—has deepened over the years, that the conversation in which his films are installments has come to a riper and more intimate stage. Dorsky has always acted the part of the gracious host, but the drama of his new films is in seeing him become less formal in his invitations, less worried over the impression he gives, and rightly confident that we'll want to keep revisiting his house of images no matter how dense or unfamiliar they become. □

MAX NELSON is an editorial assistant at The New York Review of Books and writes the *Restoration Row* column for FILM COMMENT.

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Toni Erdmann



In the Desert of Digital Art, ghosts, and rock'n'roll made up for awards-night travesties

WHY, WONDERS THE PRIVILEGED CRITIC, DOES THE CANNES FILM festival seem so much less necessary than it once did? Is it just me? Am I too jaded and tired? Did dehydration play a part? This year, with the increased security checks, it was impossible to smuggle a bottle of water into the theaters of the Palais, and with almost all of the water coolers removed from the complex, presumably for security, one often went from screening to screening without anything to quench one's thirst except the free coffee from the Nespresso bar, which had the opposite effect.

Of course, hydration matters. But the real culprit is digitization, from which there is no turning back. Not that many years ago, the glory of Cannes was not simply the selection, but the way the chosen films looked on the big screens of the Lumière and the Debussy. The 35mm projectors were state-of-the-art, and the projectionists were artisans in their own right. Filmmakers came to the theaters the night before their screenings to confer with them and to check the sound levels, the frame format, and the color temperature

of the projector bulbs. One evening in 2000, after the final screening in the Debussy, I ran into Wong Kar Wai in the lobby, waiting to check the first reel of *In the Mood for Love*. The next day we would see one of the most exquisite films in cinema history, projected in the most perfect way possible.

Now every film in the Lumière and the Debussy is projected from a DCP. That's not the festival's fault. Almost all theatrical release films, whether they're shot on film or digital, are digitally post-produced and

exhibited on digital formats. I'm sure that Cannes has the finest digital projectors available, but that doesn't make the image significantly more exciting than what you see on the best big screens in cities around the world, or on a professional studio monitor in your living room. Digital projection is death in motion—as if all the light in the image has been sucked into a black hole. Looking at four or five digitally projected movies a day is depressing. Yes, we've become acclimated to digital, and many relative newcomers to Cannes have no memory of anything else. But there is a reason that vinyl is back. People are sick of listening to their music digitally, even if it's convenient. And overdosing on digital movies is just as sickening.

PUTTING THIS UNSCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS of digital OD aside, the film selection was not so hot either, although the competition boasted one extraordinary film,

Maren Ade's audacious, hilarious **Toni Erdmann**, a screwball comedy of remarriage in which the twosome is an aging-hippy, prankster father and his corporate-ladder-climbing daughter. Ade much more than fulfills the promise she showed in her first two features, which, as I remember, weren't funny at all. Here she pulls out all the stops, from the opening wacko masquerade to the inspired series of comedic setpieces that end the movie, leaving one poised between laughter and tears. It was disheartening—no, it was completely fucked-up—that the festival competition jury awarded no prize to *Toni Erdmann*, which was by far the most popular film in the competition and which did the near-impossible by uniting entertainment-oriented and art-oriented viewers. But the less attention given to this jury the better.

Toni Erdmann was one of three female-directed films in the 21-film competition, which is a marginally better proportion than last year. Of the other two, I missed Andrea Arnold's *American Honey* but forced myself to sit through Nicole Garcia's **From the Land of the Moon**, a ludicrous post-Marguerite Duras soap opera with an unbearably schmaltzy score—as if Marion Cotillard's precise enactment of frustrated sexual desire needed a musical boost. If that sounds negative, Garcia's film was far more tolerable than the competition selections by at least four lauded male directors, specifically Xavier Dolan, Bruno Dumont, Sean Penn, and Nicolas Winding Refn.

Despite the small number of films by female directors, Kering, the foundation chaired by fashion mogul François-Henri Pinault “to support women through partnerships with NGOs and social entrepreneurs,” nevertheless made it seem as if Cannes was a hotbed of feminist activity, albeit one led by gorgeous movie stars in five-figure gowns. Kering's partnership with *Variety* insured its blanket promotion in a festival where reading the trades is an early-morning ritual. But *Variety*, well on its way to destroying its own brand, came out looking like *Women's Wear Daily*. Kering's two practical accomplishments were giving awards to three emerging Middle Eastern female directors—Leyla Bouzid, Gaya Jiji, and Ida Panahandeh—and starting a debate about whether a quota system should be applied to government funding for the arts and education (hardly relevant in the U.S. where such funding is virtually nonexistent). Honored on the 25th anniversary of *Thelma & Louise*, Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon acknowledged that their hope for the film to be the start of something hadn't yet come to pass. Chloë Sevigny added her acerbic wit to the Kering events, saying that she preferred working with women to almost any of the celebrated male directors whose films she's graced in the past two decades. Sevigny's directorial debut, **Kitty**, was the standout in a Critics' Week program of three short films by actresses. Adapted from a story by Paul Bowles, it meanders a bit at the beginning but then takes a



Paterson

turn that haunted my dreams for days. Jim Jarmusch's **Paterson** rivals *Toni Erdmann* for the festival's most audacious and pleasurable film. Both are comedies, but where Ade's film sprawls and succeeds via its script and larger-than-life performances, Jarmusch's is pared down, like a great three-chord rock song that transcends through repetitions and minute variations. The film's title is a multi-purpose referent. It's the name of a town in New Jersey; the title of a poem by William Carlos Williams, named for this same town where Williams lived, wrote, and practiced medicine; and it is the handle of the film's protagonist, played by Adam Driver, who spends his workdays, uh-huh, *driving* a bus up and down the main drag of Paterson, his birthplace and the film's only location. Like his idol, Williams, Paterson writes poetry that takes its inspiration from daily life on the job. But *Paterson*, the movie, is more contained than *Paterson*, the epic poem. It's closer to Williams's minimalist *The Red Wheelbarrow*—16 words, eight lines, four stanzas, constructed as a prescription for making art. “so much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow...” writes Williams. For Jarmusch, who divides *Paterson* into seven stanzas, one for each day of a single week in the life of the bus driver/poet and his wife, Laura (Golshifteh Farahani), so much depends on the particular quality of the light that falls on the bed where Paterson wakes up every morning next to Laura, and also on the angle from which we see the two of them, dreaming separate dreams that are shaped by their connection to each other. Each morning is the same and different. And rapturous. Jarmusch and DP Frederick Elmes find a lyricism in digital images that's different



Kitty



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Gimme Danger



from what's been achieved in film—and makes comparison beside the point.

By the way, my most memorable Cannes moment was walking up the red carpet with The Stooges blaring from the speakers. It took The Stooges to make me forget my fear of tripping over my Dr. Martens—shod feet. The ticket invitation to the midnight screening of Jarmusch's Iggy Pop documentary *Gimme Danger* said "appropriate dress," which I took to mean Comme des Garçons jacket, black jeans, and combat boots. (No one asked me what I was wearing, so I'm telling you now.) Jarmusch's tribute to The Stooges, an even bigger influence on him than Williams and the New York School poets he inspired, is as unexpectedly quiet and thoughtful as its central figure, Iggy Pop, né James Newell Osterberg Jr., although its performance clips of choice songs ("I Wanna Be Your Dog" and "I Got a Right" among many) are proof that the music is timelessly electrifying and deserved the 15-minute ovation Iggy and Jarmusch received at the end of the night.

Jarmusch went home unacknowledged by the competition jury, although Nellie, the English bulldog who played Marvin, the third party in the marriage of Paterson and Laura, received the annual Palm Dog award. Nellie's hangdog face made her the quintessential Jarmusch actor, but she also benefited from Jarmusch's perfectly timed editing, just as Kristen

Stewart's riveting non-performance in *Personal Shopper* resulted from the collaboration between the actor and the director Olivier Assayas, whose timing and shot selection is impeccable. The only deserving film to win a nod from the competition jury (Assayas shared the directing award with Cristian Mungiu, whose *Graduation* is solid but hardly as adventurous as his three earlier features), *Personal Shopper* is as ephemeral as the ghost that haunts the imagination of Maureen (Stewart), whose recently deceased twin brother had mediumistic powers. In the opening sequence, an intricate construction of sound/image relationships, Maureen, alone at night, walks through her brother's old country house, looking and listening for traces of his presence. Later Assayas serves up a Hitchcock-worthy sequence in which Maureen is terrorized by text messages that follow her from Paris to London and back again. *Personal Shopper* proved surprisingly controversial; critics in their twenties scorned Assayas for his "recent discovery of smartphones." What some of us oldsters understood is that smartphones have rendered the classical who-knows-what-and-when-do-they-know-it construction of thriller plots inoperable. In response, Assayas creates suspense, not simply by having Maureen plagued by texts from an unknown source, but by blinding her to the possibility that the

sender is very much alive and dangerous because she wants to believe that the messages come from beyond the grave. In the end, *Personal Shopper*, whose lineage stretches backward through Chris Marker's *Level Five* to *Vertigo*, is about existential loneliness and the failure of connection in a connected world.

IF STEWART'S PARTICULAR SCREEN ACTING gift allows her to function convincingly as a medium for narrative forces that her character neither fully understands nor controls, in Paul Verhoeven's *Elle* it is Isabelle Huppert who runs the show. Verhoeven would not have a film without her. As adept in the comedy of sado-masochism as she has been in melodramas and tragedies along the same psychosexual spectrum, Huppert plays Michèle, who has escaped from publishing into the more lucrative field of video games. The film we are watching may or may not be analogous to the most successful game she's produced and the ones she will produce in the future. In the opening sequence, Michèle is surprised by an intruder who rapes her. The rapist is dressed head to toe in black rubber; the rape itself involves a lot of slapping and punching. It would be just plain terrifying except that the rapist flees without pulling up his pants completely and his exposed muffin top is the tip-off that this is sex as comedy, replete with ambiguity, irony, and, eventually, consequences for the rapist. Make no mistake, the comedy is dark, but Michèle, who's at least as damaged as everyone around her, takes control, or at least as much control as the

ambivalence of her desire allows. *Elle* walks the sexual-politics tightrope with sophistication and wit, largely thanks to Huppert. It is, at the least, a movie worth arguing about—and seeing again.

Cristi Puiu's *Sieranevada*, Mungiu's *Graduation*, and Bogdan Mirica's *Dogs* testify to the continuing energy of Romanian cinema. *Dogs* is graced by the always amazing Vlad Ivanov, who here embodies pure evil as if it were no more than a matter of fact. But the most formally audacious and emotionally compelling of the three is *Sieranevada*. Taking place during a memorial for the patriarch of a large family, it is almost entirely staged in a single apartment of perhaps eight rooms, half of which open off a central corridor. Puiu's camera, the opposite of fly-on-the-wall, is in constant movement, wandering through the apartment, panning left and right, tilting up and down, making its dispassionate presence known to us, if not to the characters in the film. We've seen cameras move like that before—in Michael Snow's *Back and Forth*, or in one scene in Renoir's *The Rules of the Game*, in which the camera roams a corridor where people on the brink of disaster are playing musical beds. But to separate camera from narrative, thus distancing us from the drama without diminishing its punch, takes nerve, virtuosity, and an appreciation of how movies create and mediate emotion via movement in space. The most seductive movies in Cannes played with form so that the human comedy—the comedy of mortality—was made strange and new. □



Sieranevada

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Toni Erdmann

The Shock of the Real The art of life as lived shined through at Cannes

IF I WERE HARD-PRESSED TO SUM UP THE CANNES FILM FESTIVAL IN one word, it would have to be “trudge.” “To walk laboriously, wearily, or without spirit, but steadily and persistently,” reads the OED entry. The origin dates to the 16th century, but it could have been coined on the Croisette. At any given moment, one is highly likely to catch a glimpse of this laborious, dispirited semi-sprint, resulting from a perfect mixture of jet lag and exasperation. The typical

journey from one screening to another involves a herding through a narrow passage followed by the trudge followed by another herding through another narrow passage followed by a lunge for a decent seat, an exercise soon to be repeated. As for the bag checks and magic-wandings and daily guessing games about entry and exit points and extravagantly roundabout routes necessitated by the exponentially increased security, it all settles into a vaguely unsettling undertone, like the hum of fluorescent lights on the fritz. As for the red carpet, the rousing theme music and the announcer with the mellifluous baritone gamely attempting to pump a little drama into every arrival

(“Et maintenant...le Maire de Cannes... grand fan de rock and roll... Monsieur Daniel Lisnard!”), it’s just room tone. Through it all, an ongoing diagnosis of “the festival” runs like so much lukewarm water through a sieve.

And then there are the actual films. At the press screenings, there are close-knit groups of critics, but everyone reacts alone (it has something to do with the lighting and the acoustics, the dead air between people 10 inches away from one another). Only on the rarest of occasions does the experience become genuinely communal, and rarer still is the communal experience in sympathy with the film—more often, it’s a bloodbath on the order of *The Brown*

Bunny or *Southland Tales*.

I have heard rounds of applause at press screenings, on a few occasions in mid-film. But I have never witnessed applause building in waves. This occurred during a scene about three-quarters of the way through Maren Ade’s *Toni Erdmann*. I won’t describe the scene because a) it would spoil the surprise and b) you’ll know it when you see it. I’ve been waiting patiently for this movie during the seven long years since Ade’s *Everyone Else*, during which time she’s had two children, produced or co-produced numerous films (including Miguel Gomes’s *Tabu* and *Arabian Nights* and her partner Ulrich Köhler’s *Sleeping Sickness*), and taken her time creating a film that is abundant in so many of the qualities lacking in modern cinema, not the least of which are a continual deepening of character, moment-to-moment surprise, and genuine warmth.

Like *Everyone Else*, *Toni Erdmann* is a behavioral suspense story in which one character assumes the task of cracking the shell of another’s hardening false consciousness. In the previous film, it was a young woman and her boyish lover. Here, the agent of destruction is a small-town music teacher (Peter Simonischek) who

recognizes that his daughter (Sandra Hüller), a management consultant whose killer instincts are growing in alignment with her sycophancy, is in spiritual danger and takes it upon himself to shock her back to her senses by making his own slovenliness, annoying antics, and sheer inconvenience—the very stuff of so many parent-child conflicts—his weapons of choice. This kind of conflict is periodically milked bone-dry in lousy American movies, but *Toni Erdmann* is to such vintage Hallström-Lifetime-sitcom stuff as *Faces* is to *Love, American Style*.

Think of *The Philadelphia Story*, but with the father assuming the task of the ex-husband; the woman not as a wife-to-be but out on her own, trying to individuate in the shadow of a semi-bohemian father with a “big personality,” cast adrift in the brutal world of contemporary business; and her education not as a sudden alcohol-induced dawning but a behavioral grudge match. Reimagine it all within the fine-grained attention of Cassavetes but tempered with a greater imagination for surprise and suspense, and you’ll have some idea of *Toni Erdmann*. I have to laugh at the admiring reviewers who felt obligated to rotely cite the 162-minute running time as “indulgent,” because there’s not a wasted or even extraneous second in Ade’s unfolding narrative.

To say that Simonischek and Hüller are great is to put it mildly and state the obvious: in such an undertaking, where everything is risked at every moment, they *have* to be great or else. *Toni Erdmann* is filled with grand comic inventions, and it encompasses so many strands of experience (the loneliness of old age, the hollowness of international business culture, the struggle for identity, the joy and the sadness and the blankness of the passing moment) that it eats the material of several decades of movies for breakfast. As to the question of how such a film could go unawarded by the jury, I can only say that they had other things on their minds.

THE PRIZES THEMSELVES ARE ALWAYS something of an anticlimax, to say nothing of the ceremony in which they’re announced, covered every year by a TV crew that never fails to jump, skip, and

hiccup its way from an awkward blank stare to an interrupted swish pan to a discordant audience reaction shot. The exceptions were a visibly moved Olivier Assayas’s long-overdue award for Best Director, Cristian Mungiu’s plainspoken warning to protect serious cinema, Ken Loach’s equally urgent plea to pay close attention to the damage being incrementally done to the social fabric by privatizing capitalists, and Jean-Pierre Léaud’s acceptance of his honorary Palme d’Or. Léaud is not so much the star as the center of gravity of Albert Serra’s *The Death of Louis XIV*, which was shown out of competition. Serra’s film is simplicity itself—the title also serves as the synopsis—and its richness of texture and multi-layered historical and philosophical musing is all centered on Léaud’s game rendering of a seemingly impossible directorial idea: a movie whose action is entirely built around a monarch lying in bed, slowly losing his senses and his energy as he dies of gangrene. This is Serra’s best film, partly because of its elegant simplicity, and partly because his vast knowledge of history and his meticulous rendering of early 18th-century sybaritic existence is given vivacity and offhand life by a great actor.

Loach’s Palme d’Or-winning *I, Daniel Blake*, Léaud’s performance in Serra’s film, and Bertrand Tavernier’s glorious *Journey Through French Cinema* in Cannes Classics offered three touching reminders

of the passing of time, and three different embodiments of durability. Tavernier’s journey is a deeply personal one, at once reverent and unapologetically honest about the limitations of his heroes, the kind of close criticism that can result only from respect and intimate knowledge. It is also a shining example of what appears to be a growing genre: the documentary examination and celebration of the art of narrative cinema in the shadow of its evolution into a specialty item within the broader landscape of audiovisual entertainment. Tavernier’s celebration is a reminder of the growing coarseness of movies, and Loach’s film is a melodramatic attack on the growing coarseness of “managed care”—in the end, two manifestations of the same misbegotten moment. At the April press conference in which the selections were announced, *I, Daniel Blake* was described as “very Ken Loach,” which is true enough, I suppose: this is a remarkably consistent filmmaker, so much so that the inevitable mechanical plot twists, deck-stacking, and rhetorical overriding of the action have become as familiar and even beloved as the rings on your kitchen table or the broken springs under your favorite chair. But a very Ken Loach movie within the context of the current moment is quite different from very Ken Loach movies of earlier eras. The director and his longtime scenarist Paul Laverty have zeroed in on a situation that should resonate in the United



Journey Through French Cinema



I, Daniel Blake

States almost as deeply as it will in the U.K.: the lone individual caught in the gears of an increasingly privatized support system that is maddeningly byzantine and, as a byproduct of its attempted efficiency, casually authoritarian. Like all of Loach's films, *I, Daniel Blake* is scrupulously scaled to the modest appointments and everyday lives of people hanging on by a thread, and it gets its excitement from the idiosyncrasies and shared jokes and experiences and fears of its characters. Dave Johns's Daniel is instantly winning, and his grandiloquent and exasperated arias of disgust with the social service system are pretty well tuned to the actual experience of sitting in a fluorescent-lit labyrinth of cubicles. The film's most devastating scene, one of the single greatest moments in all the films I saw in Cannes, involves a young mother (Hayley Squires) befriended by Daniel and takes place in a food bank—again, to describe it would spoil the impact.

DANIEL IS CAUGHT IN A TYPICALLY modern catch-22: after suffering a massive heart attack, he has been told not to work by his doctor, but is forced to go through the motions of looking for a job in order to receive benefits. His late-'30s American analogue can be found in a 1939 short story called "The Paid Nurse," published in the left-wing modernist magazine *The New Anvil*. A guy

named George working in a bearings factory is instructed to clean some metal machine discs with Benzol and then dry them in a 200-degree oven. When his clothes and protective gloves catch fire, he is treated with tannic acid and told by the company nurse to get back to work or else. "The men work with worse things the matter with them than that every day, she said," George tells the neighborhood doctor to whom he appeals for help. The story was written by the actual doctor who experienced this, and it is just as concerned with the rhythm of speech and what it reveals of the lives of those speaking it as it is with the outrage of closed company systems. There is, in a word, nothing generalized about the story, which is not about a theme but about These events happening in This place to These people Right Now. The doctor-writer was better known as a poet, and for his magnum opus, a five-book poem composed over 12 years, he chose the city of Paterson, New Jersey, 10 miles away from his home in East Rutherford, as both inner and outer world—his protagonist, you might say. As he described the poem in his autobiography, "a man is indeed a city, and for the poet there are no ideas but in things."

About a year ago, when I heard the good news that Jim Jarmusch was making a movie called *Paterson*, I was assured by one of his associates that it had nothing

to do with William Carlos Williams—"No way—it's about a bus driver, played by Adam Driver, named Paterson, in Paterson." He was playing possum with me—in today's climate, you don't spread the word that you're making a movie about a bus driver/poet whose heroes are Williams and Frank O'Hara. And you certainly don't talk about the fact that the action, as such, is comprised of the driver's daily routine during a week in what would appear to be early autumn—the walk to work, the morning check-in with the disgruntled dispatcher, the bus route and the different passengers from day to day (including *Moonrise Kingdom*'s Jared Gilman and Kara Hayward as aspiring anarchists), the nightly dinners with his effervescent wife (Golshifteh Farahani) followed by the walking of the dog and a beer at the local bar. And you wouldn't even whisper a word about the fact that the entire movie is keyed to Paterson's experience and processing of these routine sights and sounds, his silent curiosity, the contrast between his hesitancy and his wife's can-do spirit, the subtle rattling of his being when the routines are broken (by the recurring appearances of twins, the bus breaking down, a freak-out at the bar), and his creation of poetry out of the elements of his existence (the poems were actually written by Ron Padgett).

No ideas but in things... and every *thing*, from the particular angles of the Blue Tip matchbox that is the basis of the opening poem to the variations in visual rhythm of the different bus rides to the contrasts between the solitude of contemplation and human interaction, is rendered with the most exquisite patience and care. I can also tell you that *Paterson* is extremely beautiful; that it was shot (by the great Frederick Elmes, reunited with Jarmusch 11 years after *Broken Flowers*) on an Alexa, and that you'll swear it's 35; that it's very funny; that Driver and Jarmusch are perfectly meshed; and that a perfectly good start for thinking about this seemingly small but ever-expanding movie can be found in Williams's namesake poem, for instance: "hard to put it; an identification and a plan for action to supplant a plan for action; a taking up of slack; a dispersal and a metamorphosis." □

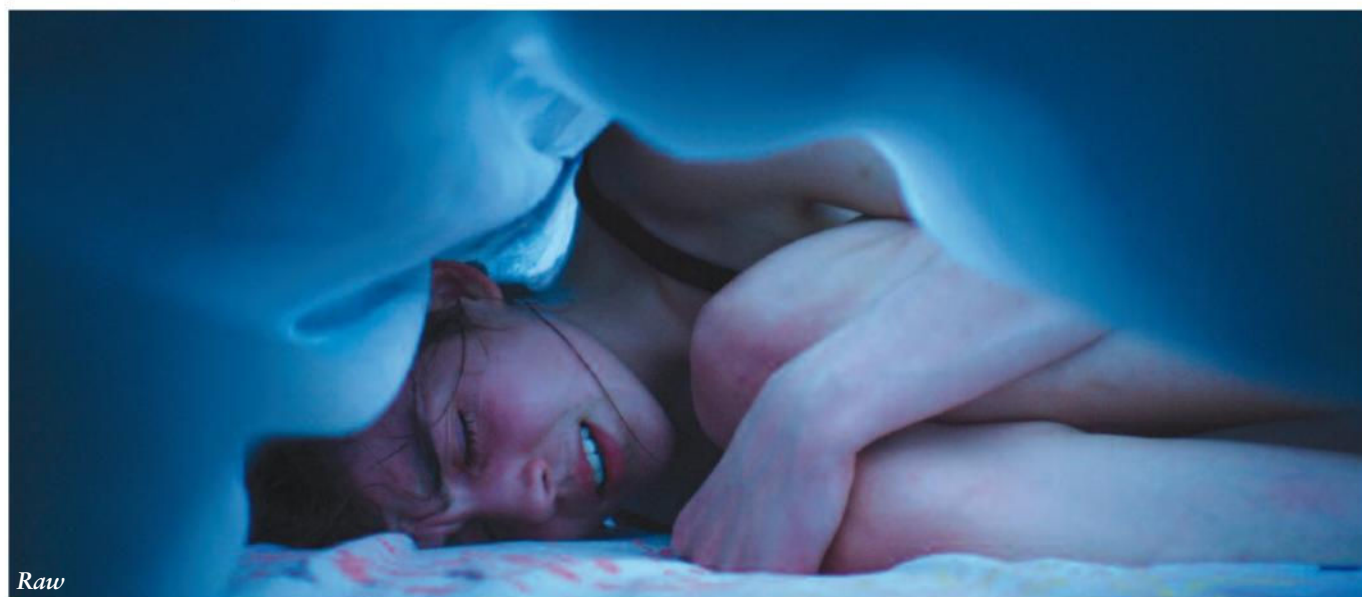
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Rebel Rebel Renegades and free spirits fueled some of the best Cannes selections

IN RECENT YEARS COMPLAINTS HAVE BEEN RAISED ABOUT THE NUMBERS of films by female directors at Cannes, but when it came to who held the screen in 2016's edition, the festival was ruled by female protagonists, letting loose in one way or another. You'll have to read our double helping of awed praise (which I second, or third) for Maren Ade's *Toni Erdmann*, which essentially spoiled the rest of the festival by setting a dauntingly high bar of excellence, though not without tempering its joie de vivre with a healthy dose of angst. The same opening weekend that debuted *Toni*

Erdmann also hosted. Andrea Arnold's *American Honey*, a sprawling road movie that had its share of detractors but was still notable for its heedless Midwestern teen protagonist—palpably and bracingly hungry for experience, making hay of the traveling magazine-sales racket that she has signed up for (partly for cash, partly out of curiosity about its fast-talking rain-maker). It felt like two movies smashed into one, and immediately upon leaving its soundtracked vision of a working-man's-dorm-on-wheels, I walked straight into the no-holds-barred private hell of Julia Ducournau's *Raw*—a fitting just-before-midnight movie to cleanse (and bloody) the palate.

Writer-director Ducournau's grisly veterinary-school thriller (you read that right) screened in Critics' Week, home to a number

of the festival's finds and in some ways more reliable than the usual Competition alternative, Directors' Fortnight. The eventually unhinged film begins innocently enough as an adolescent coming-of-age story, with bookish Justine (Garance Marillier) dropped off at the same vocational school as her sister. Marillier, who looks a bit like a tomboy younger sister to Adèle



Aquarius

Haenel, elicits our sympathy as vegetarian Justine is subjected to first-year hazing of the most revolting variety (eating rabbit kidneys, and getting excruciating rashes to boot). The claustrophobic, greasy-haired pressure-cooker of school drama, however, suddenly and deliciously gives way to something more horrific, as Justine discovers a taste not only for meat (which she wolfs down) but for her own species. Carnivorism flows into carnality, as *Raw* freshly conveys the reckless sensual abandon of Justine's tearing into her independence. Delving into brutal sibling rivalry through gamine older sister Alexia (Ella Rumpf), Ducournau's bloodily antic plot keeps one foot planted in heightened realism rather than settling into a vampiric rut, and therefore keeps us guessing about just how far things will go.

In a year of sometimes indifferent formal ambitions, it was perhaps the gusto of *Raw* that stood out most (distinct, say, from the ain't-it-cool hyperventilation of last year's Directors' Fortnight entry *Green Room*). Kleber Mendonça Filho's second feature, *Aquarius*, was anchored by another invigorating renegade, a widowed holdout (Sonia Braga) in a Brazilian beachfront

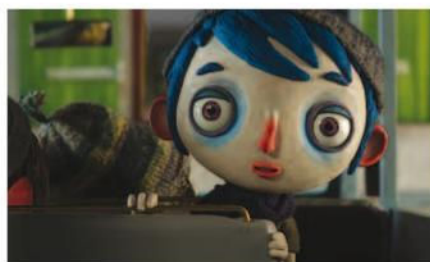
walk-up building that is coveted by developers. After the more stringent stylings and sociopolitical matrix of his previous feature *Neighboring Sounds*, Mendonça moves elegantly through this heroine's family history while letting Braga's performance drive the film. The Brazilian star's deep-seated air of pride and conversational manner allow us to inhabit the surroundings right alongside her and feel her resisting and finally confronting the drama that the world wants to thrust upon her. Having a music-critic protagonist allows the film some sweet needle-drop cues, but its naturally honeyed light is just as appealing. Without drilling home the point (well, at least until the climactic scene), the housing upheaval in *Aquarius* also spotlights one moment in an ongoing churn of historical change and cultural appropriation. And Brazil's own, very real presidential crisis had its moment at the festival, spilled out onto the red carpet with the director's protest, complete with a banner.

MULLING THE LINEUP WITH FELLOW critics on the final evening when the Competition prizes were announced to much head-shaking, I was assured that the awarding of the Palme d'Or to Ken Loach's *I, Daniel Blake* had the positive effect of puncturing the Cannes bubble and revealing the real, suffering world that lay beyond the view of us carpetbagging aesthetes. Loach's film certainly aroused my sympathies, but the festival's true laurel-winner, *Toni Erdmann*, wasn't some effete piece of dramedic escapism. Quite the contrary, Ade's extraordinary film featured some of the sharpest and most precise accounts of gender tensions in the contemporary workplace and of corporate workings that I can remember. It is, on top of everything else, a vibrantly political work at multiple levels. Likewise, Jim Jarmusch's documentary *Gimme Danger*—aka "Storytime with Iggy Pop"—may be a cycle of rock-scene war stories, but it also had a working-class backbeat that never failed to remind you of the fragile conditions under which your entertainment is created. Most striking is a clip of Iggy Pop's speech at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, in which he pronounces that "All the poor people who actually started rock 'n' roll are cool."

Another headliner documentary couldn't help but remind me of the circumstances of its creation, because of the access it involved: the Directors' Fortnight entry *Risk*, Laura Poitras's much-anticipated first feature since *CITIZENFOUR*. Foreshadowed in many ways by shorts previously premiered as part of The Intercept's Field of Vision, the new film tracks WikiLeaks mastermind Julian Assange in his state of perpetual seclusion and flight as he fights for his freedom while in captivity. While lacking the narrative snap of *CITIZENFOUR*, it nonetheless returns us to the heightened state of awareness one tends to feel as the quarry of surveillance states (much as a recession tends to lay bare the workings of an economy). Among the film's best tidbits (besides a cleverly estranging, nearly Marx Brothers moment when Lady Gaga materializes to interview Assange) is the paranoia-inducing revelation that keystrokes at a computer can be captured by an observer monitoring nearby power lines for vibrations. "It's a signal-processing problem," one of the subjects



Risk



My Life as a Zucchini



Gentleman Rissient

of the film, activist Jacob Appelbaum, explained to me about the technique after the screening. As in, an eminently solvable problem... The mood induced by the film gave the creepy Dolby trailer slogan that preceded the screening—"ALL AROUND YOU"—a new air of menace.

Lighter fare could be found in another Directors' Fortnight selection, the appealingly sentimental and wryly comic animated feature *My Life as a Zucchini*. Its fairly standard story follows a boy who ends up in an orphanage and must navigate the foibles of the other children, who range from hapless to bullying. Yet the frank, resolutely child's-eye perspective of the writing and the subtleties of color and compositional detail keep the movie from being just another tale of self-discovery with its built-in peanut gallery of oddballs. Directed by Claude Barras with an acuity for the kids' all-consuming emotional states, the charming, hour-long-and-change film was written by Céline Sciamma, who's demonstrated her knack for getting into the headspace of children and teens (as in past Fortnight opener *Girlhood*). Bonus points for the party during a winter class trip when the tykes dance to Grauzone's "Eisbär."

Through Cannes Classics, the festival also featured its usual raft of restorations to place alongside the main slate's account of mercurial opportunities to celebrate cinephilia itself. Directed by Benoît Jacquot, Pascal Merigeau, and Guy Seligmann, *Gentleman Rissient* consists of the titular film-culture god regaling the camera with stories, in a living room equipped with a projection television: a typical shot begins with a clip shown on the wall, before panning over to him. Although the doc and its clips look a fright, and *Rissient* was the subject of a previous film by critic Todd McCarthy nearly a decade ago, his anecdotes about filmmakers remain worth hearing for their present-for-the-birth pedigree, ranging from being privy to Fritz Lang's obsessive daily logbook, to getting close with Clint. But the greatest takeaway, epitomized by *Rissient* stumping for an obscure recent Indonesian police drama, is one that Cannes itself would do well to heed: going beyond simply affirming known masters of cinema, but sussing out new talents, wherever they may lie across the globe. □



The Well-Told Tale Five Cannes standouts took different approaches to getting the whole story

PAUL VERHOEVEN'S UP-AND-DOWN CAREER HAS ACCOMMODATED several cycles of derision and rehabilitation. His most notorious films started out as punching bags (or punch lines) before being reclaimed as misappreciated critical causes. But no redemption seems necessary with Verhoeven's first feature in a decade (and his first in French), *Elle*, which emerged in the home stretch of this year's Cannes Film Festival as an unlikely favorite among the press corps. Is the audience no longer shockable? Or are these simply more compatible times for this instinctive provocateur's brash cynicism, blithe amorality, and nothing-is-sacred worldview?

On paper, *Elle* would seem to be one of Verhoeven's more incendiary concoctions: a wry, almost-screwball comedy of manners about one woman's rather unusual response to a rape. Adapted by David Birke from the French novelist Philippe Djian's *Oh...* (and conceived as an English-language film before Verhoeven was turned down by every American actress he approached), *Elle* begins in extremis, amid screams and grunts, as we first hear, then see, Michèle (Isabelle Huppert) being brutally violated in her kitchen by a hooded intruder (her cat watches, along with us). In the aftermath, she calmly sweeps up the mess, takes a bubble bath, orders in sushi. Is she in denial, or is the film suggesting that, for Michèle, being raped was no big deal? As a more conventional film would, *Elle* goes about

unmasking and punishing the perpetrator, but it takes a circuitous route there, via a push-pull mind game of domination and submission and an exploration of sado-masochistic desire that ranks with *Blue Velvet* in its black-comic audacity.

In a festival that began with a rape joke at Woody Allen's expense (by opening-ceremony host and *Elle* star Laurent Lafitte) and that featured competition titles (by Cristian Mungiu and Asghar Farhadi) in which sexual assaults serve as convenient plot instigators, Verhoeven's film stood apart for the unflinching directness with which it addresses its central trauma. In fact *Elle* returns over and over to the rape, each time altering the dynamic between perpetrator and victim: first Michèle flashes back to it, rewriting it in her head as an avenging fantasy, then she

effectively invites her attacker to reenact it.

As with Verhoeven's best work, *Elle* sustains a tension between the brisk certainty of the filmmaking and the ambiguity of its heroine's actions and motivations. Michèle, no less resilient than the Holocaust survivor of *Black Book* (06), refuses the mantle of victimhood. *Elle* situates this contradictory woman within a constellation of personal and professional relationships: with her sexually avid mother, her ex-husband and clueless son, the female colleague whose husband she's sleeping with, and the mostly male employees devising misogynistic scenarios at the video-game company she runs. What exactly this woman wants, thanks in no small part to Huppert's impish performance, is a continual source of mystery and comedy. Verhoeven is often called a misanthrope, but it may be more accurate to consider him a gleeful connoisseur of human psychopathology; it is hardly a surprise that *Elle*, a veritable encyclopedia of wayward impulses and desires, is also his most playful and tender film.

Another taxonomist of unorthodox eroticism, Alain Guiraudie made his Cannes competition debut with his latest shape-shifting pastoral, *Staying Vertical*. In Guiraudie's previous film and critical breakthrough, *Stranger by the Lake*, a cruising ground becomes a murder scene, an outdoor stage for the dueling forces of eros and thanatos. In the new film, sex and death merge even more sensationally in a setpiece that combines euthanasia, borderline necrophilia, and a blast of Pink Floydish prog rock. This is but one out-there encounter in an oneiric odyssey for the protagonist, Léo (Damien Bonnard), a blocked filmmaker cruising the French countryside in his Renault, seeking inspiration for an overdue script and finding all manner of carnal stimuli. He's drawn to a young man who lives with a much older custodian (possibly lover), and begins an affair with a shepherdess (India Hair), with whom he almost immediately has a child.

Guiraudie's films are modern-day fairy tales, rooted in concrete glimpses of his native southwestern France but also given to free-associative flights of fancy. *Staying Vertical* cycles among a limited number of locations—farmhouse, pasture, a winding

mountain road, a gray coastal town—as its characters rearrange themselves in an egalitarian diagram of desire. Guiraudie's great subject, which his films engage in both content and form, is freedom, perhaps never more so than in *Staying Vertical*. Taking a sidelong look at what most other movies would flag as social issues—single parenthood, assisted suicide—the film also flirts with the mythic, in the interludes with a swamp-dwelling healer and the ever-present specter of the wolves roaming the periphery. The title has the ring of both a rallying cry and a dirty joke, though the film above all asks to be read as a rumination on what it means to be a human being, a vertical animal. The vast spectrum of life is here, from frontally filmed birth to ecstatic death, sex as the origin of the world (several shots overtly reference Courbet) and also the end.

WHILE THE CANNES OF TODAY, WITH its club of pantheon auteurs, typically leaves little room for true discoveries—as Guiraudie's *That Old Dream That Moves* was, back in 2001—the Critics' Week, the one parallel section devoted to new filmmakers, had a strong year, and a most deserving winner in Oliver Laxe's *Mimosas* (the film-within-the-film in Ben Rivers's recent Morocco-set *The Sky Trembles and the Earth Is Afraid and the Two Eyes Are Not Brothers*). Laxe's first feature, *You All Are Captains* (10), in which he played a version of himself, a filmmaker running a workshop for children in Tangier who stage a mid-movie mutiny, was at once a documentary of its own making and a restless metafiction about how narratives can be activated and reframed.

A more straightforward enterprise on the surface, *Mimosas* is a quest story and landscape study, drawing on Laxe's time in Morocco and his immersion in Sufi mysticism. There is a similar sense of slippage as in *Captains*, albeit to more metaphysical ends. Shakib Ben Omar, who appeared in the second half of *Captains* as Laxe's replacement, here plays an intense young man tasked with escorting a caravan to safety. Taking a taxi far into the desert, he seems to travel to another time as well. He joins a band of men on horseback—and the dead body they are transporting—on a trek marked by both physical and spiritual tests, through the treacherous, majestic

terrain of the Atlas Mountains (captured on 16mm film by cinematographer Mauro Herce). A Western with shades of the uncanny, *Mimosas* has the openness of a parable: it doesn't dramatize so much as embody the mysteries of faith.

Markers of time and place are also disorientingly absent in one of the festival's genuine whatsits, Alessandro Comodin's *Happy Times Will Come Soon*, which screened out of competition in Critics' Week. The film proceeds in cryptic leaps: a long passage following two young fugitives in the wild, a series of talking heads recounting a local lupine folk legend, a loose dramatization of that myth, and so on. Comodin won admirers with his 2011 feature debut *Summer of Giacomo*, and this follow-up, though perhaps too obviously beholden to the likes of Lisandro Alonso and Apichatpong



Staying Vertical



Mimosas



Happy Times Will Come Soon

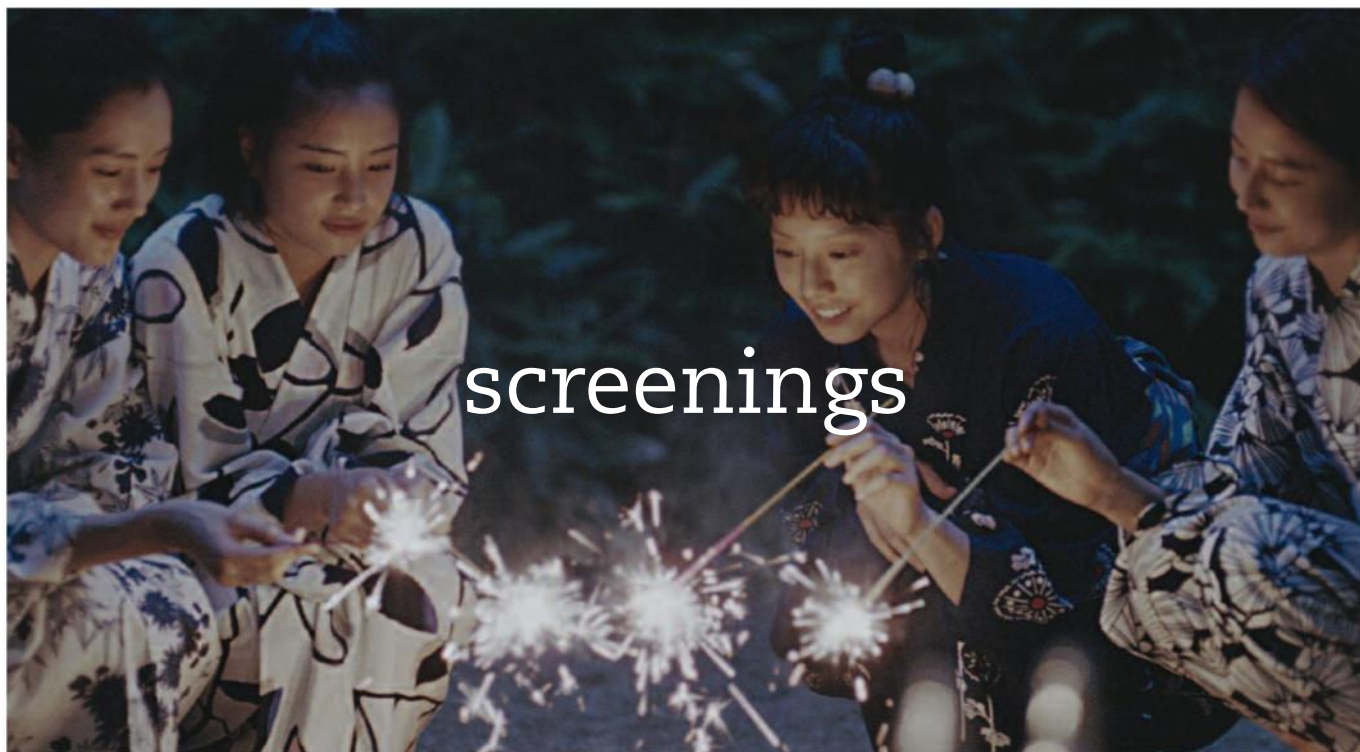


The Death of Louis XIV

Weerasethakul, contained some of the most haunting passages of the festival. *Happy Times* also confirms that Italian cinema is particularly fertile ground for the productive commingling of documentary and myth, as most recently seen in Pietro Marcello's *Lost and Beautiful* and Alessio Rigo de Righi and Matteo Zoppis's *Il solengo*.

Albert Serra, one of the most singular and radical filmmakers working today, was accorded an out-of-competition slot in the official selection for *The Death of Louis XIV*, his latest foray into cinematic antiquity. Jean-Pierre Léaud, recipient of an honorary Palme d'Or at the closing ceremony, stars as the Sun King, slowly wasting away from gangrene in his candlelit bedchamber. A hushed, dilated, improbably absorbing counterpoint to any number of movie death scenes, filled with painstaking details gleaned from Saint-Simon's memoirs and other historical texts, *Louis XIV* is about not just death but also its representation. The king's was a demise performed in front of others, including a retinue of doctors prone to denial and misdiagnosis, and assorted courtiers and relatives, watching with rapt attention as the enfeebled monarch summons the effort to don a hat or take a nibble of a biscotto.

As darkly funny as it is moving, *The Death of Louis XIV* reveals the absurdity of these anachronistic rituals, but even more so of death itself. There is a certain poignancy in Léaud, now 72, synonymous with French cinema for over half a century, playing the longest-reigning French king in his final days. Gazing out from the most voluminous of wigs, barely speaking or moving for much of the film—staying horizontal, as it were—Léaud delivers a remarkable performance that concerns matters both grimly physical and dauntingly abstract. We see a body in decay but also sense the depletion of power, the evacuation of life. *The Death of Louis XIV*, winner of this year's Prix Jean Vigo, is Serra's most classical film as well as the clearest expression of his career project. His films bring the mythic past to life through a rejection of spectacle, by distilling events to the sparest of anecdotes and imbuing figures with the mundane weight of existence. In *The Death of Louis XIV* it is none other than death, the great leveler, that reanimates history as lived experience. □



Our Little Sister

REVIEW BY ALIZA MA

Director: Hirokazu Kore-eda

Country/Year: Japan, 2015

Opening: July 8

Where: New York and Los Angeles

OVER THE PAST TWO DECADES AND COUNTING, THE BEACH, the family house, and the hospital have been the physical domains of Kore-eda's cinema. It is a cinema of minutiae, of the past and present, surveying the tininess and transitory condition of human life, like "grains of sand on the beach," as he has described it—a cinema through which he examines how uncontrollable external circumstances affect our sense of identity and belonging.

His newest film, *Our Little Sister*, follows the lives of four sisters over four seasons in the seaside village of Kamakura. All in their twenties, Sachi (Haruka Ayase), Yoshino (Masami Nagasawa), and Chika (Kaho) live together in an old house passed down from their grandmother. When the death of their estranged father takes them to Yamagata for the funeral, they meet their shy teenage half-sister Suzu (the fresh-faced Suzu Hirose)—the daughter of the now-deceased woman who stole their father away from their family—and quickly decide to adopt her.

The humble seaside setting and the plot, almost shocking in its simplicity, is the perfect pretext for Kore-eda's quintessential examination of time and memory. Like collected dewdrops, its collated moments of quotidian pleasures reawaken the senses—a

bike ride shown in slow motion through a tunnel of sakura blossoms pulsates with the sensorial pleasure of everyday-ness—while giving rise to an awareness of the impermanent nature of an individual life, a family unit, and a town. "What interests me is not only the beauty of the scenery of Kamakura—or of the four sisters," Kore-eda explained once in an interview, "but also . . . the beauty that arises from the realization . . . that the town, and the time there, continue even when we are gone."

The sisters take their time going for long walks on the beach, cooking meals for each other, and making plum wine from the fruit of the old tree in their yard. Kore-eda and cinematographer Mikiya Takimoto (*Like Father, Like Son*) capture the activities in and around the house in gently swiveling pans, nimble low-angle views, and lingering long shots of the sea and bucolic surroundings. Never shying away from the picturesque, the film depicts a vivid world that is crystal clear, gleaming, and suffused with life.

As a storyteller, Kore-eda does not resort to generic formulas. The first major conflict occurs in the film's second half, when a visit from the girls' biological mother temporarily disturbs the equilibrium of the house, belying the sadness and entropy looming

Its collated moments of quotidian pleasures reawaken the senses while giving rise to an awareness of the impermanent nature of an individual life, a family unit, and a town.

just outside the periphery of the film's frame. The cold, strained relationship the girls have with her—in contrast to their love for their surrogate mother figure, the owner of the charmingly named Sea Cat Diner—poses a question grappled with in many of Kore-eda's films regarding the fundamental artifice of family relationships and the impossibility of

knowing someone in spite of blood relations.

A melodrama of negative spaces, the film is just as much about characters who are not there: the father, the grandmother, Suzu's deceased mother, the ancestors to whom they pray in their home shrine. There are no flashbacks, and much of what is felt by the characters goes unsaid; instead we see them looking at each other or out onto the vast, seemingly endless landscape. What is not shown are the girls' unsuccessful romances, the failure of parents to nurture their children, Suzu's thwarted childhood as she is left to deal with her mother's death and her father's illness, Sachi's new post at the terminal care center of the hospital. Any of these could have too easily made for more suspenseful and grim dramatic material, but their absence only intensifies the preciousness and richness of each passing moment in *Our Little Sister*.

The Innocents

REVIEW BY KRISTIN M. JONES

Director: Anne Fontaine

Country/Year: France, 2016

Opening: July 1

Where: Limited

THE COLOR BLUE RIPPLES THROUGH ANNE FONTAINE'S *The Innocents*, in wintry shadows or clothing that suggests the celestial hue of a Madonna's veil. The story begins in December 1945, as a group of Polish Benedictine nuns and novices gather in half-light for prayers and sing the serene medieval Advent chant "Conditor Alme Siderum," a hymn to the "creator of the stars of night." But in this season of waiting, the women aren't anticipating only Christmas. They are also expecting other births, after a trauma that reverberates within the convent's walls like a silent explosion.

The women were raped by Red Army soldiers following the Nazi occupation. Many are pregnant. Summoned by a frightened novice to help one who is in agonizing labor, a young doctor with the French Red Cross, Mathilde (Lou de Laâge), performs a cesarean by the light of a single glowing lamp, in the company of the formidable abbess (Agata Kulesza) and the kind younger nun Sister Maria (Agata Buzek). The chiaroscuro scene recalls a Georges de La Tour painting, but the surgery echoes the violence to which the women were subjected. Flesh and faith have both been violated.

Mathilde, an atheist who was raised in a communist family, is in Warsaw to treat French citizens, but she breaches protocol to help the sisters and keep their secret. The story is based on the experiences of the real-life *résistante* and doctor Madeleine Pauliac, who during the period treated French soldiers still in Poland, and also aided women who had been raped repeatedly, including nuns.

Sometimes wearing a blue scarf and sweater that link her character visually with the spiritual atmosphere of the convent, de Laâge plays Mathilde as a forthright nonbeliever who unhesitatingly accepts the women's varying responses to their situation—one young woman in such denial that she unexpectedly gives birth on the floor of her cell—as well as the challenge to care for them in these extraordinary circumstances. Mathilde has

Lou de Laâge plays the young doctor Mathilde as a forthright nonbeliever who unhesitatingly accepts the women's varying responses to their situation.

a poignantly fleeting affair with Samuel (Vincent Macaigne, also in a fine performance), a sardonic but endearing fellow doctor who matter-of-factly tells her that his family was killed in Bergen-Belsen. "Yes, I'm Jewish. There are a few of us left," he says impatiently to the abbess after Mathilde brings him to the convent when two members of the order are about to give birth at the same time.

Although Samuel is not a central figure in the story, the Holocaust casts a long shadow, and not only because Kulesza previously played the former state prosecutor whose Jewish family members were murdered in Pawel Pawlikowski's *Ida*, a tormented and complex figure like the abbess. *The Innocents* also recalls *Of Gods and Men*, Xavier Beauvois's chronicle of monks in Algeria who were killed by extremists after refusing to abandon the community to which they were dedicated. But the dilemma the monks face in Beauvois's film contrasts with the trauma and shame women are left to grapple with in *The Innocents*. A measure of peace and joy is achieved at the end of Fontaine's film, but one wonders what scars remain.

With an austere but painterly palette, DP Caroline Champetier subtly captures the frost-bound landscape and figures and faces of the nuns. *The Innocents* observes the women's struggles with a somber reserve. Maria, who has a past and seems wise beyond her years, says: "However much I pray, I cannot find any consolation. Every day I relive what happened. Every day. I still smell the stench of them." But in a less despairing moment she tells Mathilde: "Faith is 24 hours of doubt and one minute of hope."

In addition to more widely known Latin chants, the spare soundtrack includes music by the 12th-century Benedictine abbess, scholar, mystic, and composer Hildegard von Bingen. The ethereal vocals evoke a longing for the eternal—which, in one character's response to the trauma, is destructive rather than beautiful—but also recall the power of female community and solidarity in a fallen world.



The BFG

REVIEW BY MICHAEL KORESKEY

Director: Steven Spielberg

Country/Year: U.K./Canada/U.S., 2016

Opening: July 1

Where: Wide

IT'S NOT EASY TO RECALL WHY SOMETHING STRUCK US WHEN WE were young. With childhood but a distant land, I recently reread *The BFG* by Roald Dahl, a book and an author that once upon a time meant a great deal to me and countless other little bookworms, and understood, with the rush of a sense memory, that it wasn't the story arc or outlandish scenario that had appealed to me but the language. Dahl, in marvelous creations such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Matilda*, and *The Witches*, introduced us to the wonders of words, constructing sentences so scrumptious one felt inclined to take a bite out of them. And *The BFG*—a small, delicate novel about a huge, galumphing character—is perhaps Dahl's greatest flight of linguistic fancy, a muckfrumping, swizzfiggling, sloshflunking contraption bursting with onomatopoeia and malapropisms and so many made-up words it feels like it's inventing a new language—*Finnegans Wake* for tots.

With the pleasure of written words—how they look splashed out on a page, how they're spelled, how they sound in our heads—necessarily missing, Steven Spielberg has to find ways to replace that magic in his Disney-produced adaptation of Dahl's novel, about the blossoming friendship between little Sophie (Ruby Barnhill) and the benevolent behemoth who absconds with her from her London orphanage bedroom to a Northern England fantasyland. Employing his usual troupe of imagineers—cinematographer

Janusz Kaminski, editor Michael Kahn, production designer Rick Carter, composer John Williams—the director relies on cutting-edge CGI, spectacular vistas, and, as in so many of today's kiddie flicks, whiz-bang movement for his emotional effects, so that a work of enchanting frippery is amped up to the heights of cinematic adventure. It's not that Spielberg's film isn't *faithful*—a word far more meaningless than Dahl's goofy neologisms—to the author's narrative, but that when put into self-consciously cinematic form, *The BFG*, which stands for Big Friendly Giant, becomes too big, too friendly, and too giant, in its rollicking gambols, patronizing slapstick, and certainly in its swelling sentimentality. The giant functions well as an authorial surrogate—he blows dreams into the heads of sleeping children, a nice metaphor, easily translatable from Dahl to Spielberg—but otherwise the film feels slick and a little anonymous.

At least there's Mark Rylance, Spielberg's unlikely new creative partner, recently Oscar-minted for his gorgeously crumpled portrait of a Soviet spy in the beautiful *Bridge of Spies*. Anyone who saw the actor onstage in his towering, Tony-awarded role in *Jerusalem*, as a blustering beast of a man living in the depths of the English shire, knows he can go big. But Rylance's motion-

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capture work as the title character here is a lovely, pocket-size interpretation, and an antidote to the cloying Barnhill; unlike so many other actors doing voices for kiddie films, Rylance's inward, self-critical BFG feels like a genuine performance. The actor's decision to retreat, to disappear into his character's giant husk, smartly and effectively underlines the class allegory of Dahl's story: the BFG feels



unworthy and outcast not simply because of his size but also his lack of education and improper grammar. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the film's third movement, which sees the BFG accompanying Sophie to Buckingham Palace and trying to be on his best, tea-sipping, pinky-raised behavior in the presence of the Queen; he's an earthy workingman struggling to fit—literally—inside the world of the upper-crusts.

With his fanciful tales of class struggle and his cheeky, colorful way with words, Dahl was a clear descendant of Charles Dickens—or “Dahl's Chickens,” as he's malaproped in *Matilda*. (In a nod, Sophie reads *Nicholas Nickleby*, as Celie learned to read with *Oliver Twist* in Spielberg's *The Color Purple*.) Such matters get lost, however, amid Spielberg's action contraptions, mostly involving brutish, bullying giants with terrifying names like Bloodbottler and Bonecruncher, who torment the comparably “runty” BFG in interminable sequences that recall the nonstop rambunctiousness of the motion-capture *Adventures of Tintin*, but without the runaway-train gracefulness. The lumbering weight of the film's CGI squashes the boundless imagination of Dahl's original story, which not only is about dreams but also glides ahead on dream logic.

Microbe & Gasoline

REVIEW BY VIOLET LUCCA

Director: Michel Gondry

Country/Year: France, 2015

Opening: July 1

Where: Limited

A FEW YEARS BACK, A COMPANY SOLICITING YOUNG FILMMAKERS to direct commercials tried to tempt potential applicants with the line “Be the next Michel Gondry!” Given Gondry's variable success at the box office, the ad's appeal seems to refer to a general air of originality, the sweetly surreal, the handmade. Often imitated but never truly replicated, the Gondrian sensibility is rooted in fantastical imagery that expresses some type of fragility: the crumbling mindscapes of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (04), the woman perpetually on the verge of awakening and refracting herself in the video for the Chemical Brothers' “Let Forever Be,” or the earnest crappiness of the “sweded” movies in *Be Kind Rewind* (08) that bring together a neighborhood threatened by gentrification.

Gondry's last widely released feature, 2011's *The Green Hornet*, committed the cardinal sin of not launching a superhero franchise and seemingly banished the director from Hollywood. But no matter—when not getting bogged down by the demands of producers (as with 2013's *Mood Indigo*), he's been doing his finest work and expanding the scope of what “Gondrian” means. In *Microbe & Gasoline*, the filmmaker returns to the fertile ground of youth previously explored in the painfully accurate portrait of teenagers *The We and the I* (12). In this non-standard road movie, Daniel (Ange Dargent) lives in Versailles with his two brothers, very depressive mother, and exasperated father; at school, he's called “Microbe” because of his small stature. One of those kids who is always



drawing, Daniel is introduced waking up an hour before his alarm goes off so he can eat breakfast by himself and then climb back into bed; he's elected to be a loner as much as it's been forced on him.

Daniel's bond with Theo (Théophile Baquet), the new kid at school and a kind-hearted smart-ass, is almost instantaneous. Theo's an effortlessly cool kid who'd probably be more popular if his family wasn't so poor. He arrives at school in his third-rate red “Thriller” jacket smelling like a garage, and is derisively dubbed “Gasoline” by some bullies. Dramatizing the two boys' respective insecurities and strengths, Gondry has crafted a pair of loners who complement each other but aren't so outrageously different that their companionship feels forced.

Like his antique shop owner dad, Theo is a connoisseur of junk, and after acquiring an old two-stroke engine, he resolves to build a car so that he and Daniel can live “the dream of absolute independence.” When they discover that their creation can't legally be driven on any road, they disguise it as a house: with a pull of a flap, the wheels are covered, making it undetectable to police. This design (and the fact that the trick actually works) is the only explicit Gondry quirk we're offered, and the film never crosses into the realms of the overly precious. With the two travelers on the cusp of raging teenage horniness, their destination is a camp in the rural Aubrac staffed by buxom cooks. Daniel secretly reroutes their trajectory in the hopes of encountering his school crush at her family's cabin. Their journey leads them to an overzealous dentist, a motorcycle gang that plays American football, and a deepened distaste for our ultra-connected, digital world.

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Far more important to the film than these adventures is the chemistry between Daniel and Theo. Gondry wisely opts to portray each boy's sadness through his actions (Daniel's sleeplessness, Theo's desire to run away) rather than through episodes of anger or on-the-nose dialogue. These boys are all too real, and their final moment together is among the most quietly devastating in all of Gondry's oeuvre.

short takes



CAPTAIN FANTASTIC

Director: Matt Ross

Country/Year: U.S., 2016

Opening: July 8

Where: Limited

THE ROBINSON CRUSOE FANTASY SEEMS TO hold a peculiar grip on American indies. With some regularity, films like *Captain Fantastic* (and *Swiss Army Man*) appear, featuring outliers who patch together their homes and personal styles from outré or whimsical sources. Perhaps certain indie directors identify with these DIYers, who often see their idiosyncratic visions come crashing up against limits imposed by the rest of the world.

Single dad of six Ben (Viggo Mortensen) is the latest go-it-aloner to hit screens, prominent in ad stills in a retro red wedding suit alongside his Scooby Doo–palette family. Living with his well-trained kids in mountain-man isolation, he's a fiercely protective, unreconstructed leftist like Daniel Day-Lewis's in *The Ballad of Jack and Rose*. Until... family drama! The deer-gutting, Bill of Rights–quoting children start asking questions, and a road trip leads the brood into the clutches of a rich, square grandfather (Frank Langella).

Writer-director Ross lapses into contrivance, narrative and emotional, but it'd be worse without Mortensen's utter conviction and that rugged, out-of-time mien which has served him well in stories of extremity from *The Road* to *Jauja*. A very surprised Ross won a major prize at Cannes for his efforts, months after the film's Sundance debut, but for my money, nothing improves upon the opening drone-like shot of sunny mountain woods, the perspective faintly curved, a perverse snow-globe snap-shot of isolation.—*Nicolas Rapold*



THE CHILDHOOD OF A LEADER

Director: Brady Corbet

Country/Year: U.K./France, 2015

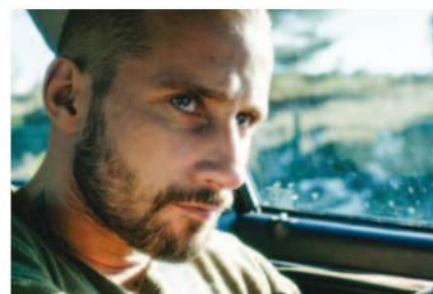
Opening: July 22

Where: Limited

YOU CAN'T FAULT ACTOR BRADY CORBET FOR lack of ambition in his debut feature, which comes complete with a Scott Walker score. Set during the Great War in rural France, *The Childhood of a Leader* centers on three progressively vicious tantrums thrown by its prepubescent protagonist, Prescott (Tom Sweet). The son of an aging American diplomat (Liam Cunningham) and a polymath German mother (Bérénice Bejo) who resents tending house, Prescott is isolated from children his own age by language and appearance (he refuses to cut his long, blonde locks, and is frequently mistaken for a girl).

At first, his outbursts appear to be understandable responses to frustration, or ways of testing boundaries, but they quickly turn pathological. Unable to forge friendship or intimacy with his authoritarian parents, the boy counts as his only companions an overly sympathetic maid (Yolande Moreau) and his French teacher (Stacy Martin). When the latter rejects his precocious attempt at groping, he retaliates by becoming a dedicated autodidact and refusing to wear clothes, even while company's around.

Unlike in the Sartre short story with which the film shares a title (and which was a parable for Hitler), Prescott's aggression has no clear real-life referent. Even though the Treaty of Versailles, which precipitated the rise of Hitler, is hashed out in his living room with his diplomat father as host, *Childhood* is less a j'accuse than a bad, half-remembered dream about history.—*Violet Lucca*



DISORDER

Director: Alice Winocour

Country/Year: France/Belgium, 2015

Opening: August 12

Where: Limited

POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER MAY be a familiar presence in contemporary cinema, but it's only one dramatic strand in Alice Winocour's invigorating second feature. The French writer-director's interest in genre—in this case, the thriller—is of a practical nature, concerned as much with craft as is with the particulars of plot.

Matthias Schoenaerts stars as Vincent, an aggrieved ex-soldier hired to protect Jessie (Diane Kruger), the wife of a wealthy Lebanese arms dealer. *Disorder* unfolds in a manner resembling its no-nonsense protagonist: chiseled and efficient, the film discards all extraneous gestures. The majority of the characters' psychological development occurs through its three increasingly impressive setpieces: two in and around the secluded mansion where Vincent and Jessie spend their time cautiously considering each other's intentions; and one in a parking lot where an attempted kidnapping devolves into a brutal, nerve-jangling shoot-out.

Refreshingly, little attempt is made to psychoanalyze Vincent, the cognitive effects of his condition instead rendered through handheld but precise camerawork and an intricate, disorienting sound mix. His and Jessie's contrived situation likewise forgoes fortuitous romantic complications. Even the film's ending is left to the viewer's interpretation rather than neatly packaged with explication. With *Disorder*, Winocour has skillfully reconfigured established forms, calling upon the medium's most elemental tools to prompt an intensely physical response.—*Jordan Cronk*



INTO THE FOREST

Director: Patricia Rozema

Country/Year: Canada, 2015

Opening: July 29

Where: Limited

IN CANADIAN AUTEUR PATRICIA ROZEMA'S harrowing new film, set in an unspecified near-future, two young sisters' dreams are brought to a sudden halt when a power outage strikes, leaving them and their devoted dad stranded in their house somewhere in the Northern California woods. At first, it seems like a routine disruption, but through radio reports and one nail-biting trip into town, they realize that they are facing a widespread shutdown.

Déjà-vu-inducing setup aside, this is not your typical apocalyptic tale. In lieu of virus outbreaks and violent looting, the story focuses firmly on what takes place within the family home. Attempting to preserve the status quo, Nell (Ellen Page), the more practical of the two, continues to study for the SATs by candlelight, while Eva (Evan Rachel Wood), the more selfishly obsessive, dances away in preparation for an audition. But when their father is killed in a grisly chainsaw accident, they are left to their own devices.

As the days and months elapse, we are immersed in intense isolation with the two girls—and the occasional visitor—as they face starvation and shelter that is literally collapsing in on them. While Page and Wood hardly look like sisters, their commanding, utterly believable performances remove any doubt. Nell and Eva's relationship forms the heart of the film and, along with the fleeting moments of ecstasy they find in things previously taken for granted—eating a piece of chocolate, watching home movies—their bond provides something of genuine beauty in a progressively bleak world.—*Laura Kern*



SOUTHSIDE WITH YOU

Director: Richard Tanne

Country/Year: U.S., 2016

Opening: August 26

Where: Limited

PRIOR TO HIS ELECTION AS AMERICA'S 44TH President, we the people learned a great deal about Barack Obama: of his troubled mixed-race parentage, the exotic locales of his youth, his chain smoking, his powers of verbal persuasion. These factoids are dutifully trotted out in writer/director Richard Tanne's *Southside with You* with a clockwork regularity that suggests a faithful screenwriter blissfully untouched by inspiration.

The framework for Tanne's feature-length information dump is Barack's storied 1989 first date with Michelle Robinson (Tika Sumpter), in which the pair took in an African art exhibit, went on a long walk, caught a late show of *Do the Right Thing* and managed a chaste first kiss over ice cream. The meet-cute romantic framework allows Michelle to act as audience surrogate and gradually coax the life history from her loquacious suitor.

As Barack, Parker Sawyers knows to keep one hand tucked comfortably in his chinos at nearly all times, so that the other can move freely through space, and occasionally come to rest behind an earlobe, as he talks and talks in that familiar rhythmic cadence. Yet as a director, Tanne's feel for the Southside is as bird's-eye pedestrian as a satellite image. His needless use of a 'scope frame only serves to highlight the film's paucity of any real ideas.

One wishes for any glimpse of a *raison d'être* for the film, even a hint of hoary, patriotic sturdiness that would mark this as something like *Barack Obama in Illinois*. It sadly never arrives.—*Jeff Reichert*



SUMMERTIME

Director: Catherine Corsini

Country/Year: France/Belgium, 2015

Opening: July 15

Where: New York and Los Angeles

FRAMED AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF THE 1970s feminist movement in France, *Summertime* explores the age-old conflict between love and duty through a delicately drawn portrait of a tumultuous lesbian relationship. The robust daughter of farmers, Delphine (Izïa Higelin) moves to Paris in search of independence, and finds herself involved in a women's liberation group. At the vanguard of the struggle is Carole (Cécile de France), a vibrant and outspoken Spanish instructor with whom Delphine becomes infatuated at first sight.

Blending lyrical simplicity with voluptuous romanticism, the film traces the development of the women's affair as they travel from the city to the country. Compelled to take over her father's farm after he suffers a stroke, Delphine soon realizes her sexual identity is incompatible with her conservative heritage. Where Carole finds an impetus for rebellion, Delphine uncovers the painful necessity for compliance.

The juxtaposition of pulsating Paris with the static and reactionary countryside yields a compelling metaphor for Delphine's moral conundrum. Director Catherine Corsini depicts the emergence of desire in raw, rapturous bedroom scenes, which possess the ethereal quality of impressionistic painting, and benefit greatly from the palpable chemistry between Higelin and de France, who is translucent here. What's frustrating about *Summertime* is its sometimes overly didactic tone, by which it clumsily attempts to wrap up its own difficult questions about personal freedom.—*Yonca Talu*

TOP 10

1. **A Touch of Zen** King Hu, Tai., 71; Criterion \$29.95
2. **Orson Welles x 2: Chimes at Midnight**, Fr./Sp./Switz., 65;  **The Immortal Story**, Fr., 68; Criterion \$29.95 each
3. **Sunset Song** Terence Davies, U.K./Lux., 15; Magnolia \$26.98
4. **Pioneers of African-American Cinema** 40 films, 1915-1985; Kino Lorber \$79.95 box set
5. **Muriel, or The Time of Return** Alain Resnais, Fr./It., 63; Criterion \$39.95
6. **10 Cloverfield Lane** Dan Trachtenberg, 16; Paramount \$29.99
7. **My Golden Days** Arnaud Desplechin, Fr., 15; Magnolia \$26.98
8. **Mountains May Depart** Jia Zhangke, China/Fr./Jap., 15; Kino Lorber \$29.95
9. **The Pack** Nick Robertson, Austral., 15; Shout! Factory \$14.98
10. **Midnight Special** Jeff Nichols, 16; Warner \$28.98

RECOMMENDED

- 13 **Cameras** Victor Zarcoff, 15; Kino Lorber \$24.95
- Aferim!** Radu Jude, Rom./Bulg./Czech Rep./Fr., 15; Big World Pictures \$29.95
- Difret** Zeresenay Mehari, Eth./U.S., 14; Passion River \$24.95
- Forbidden Hollywood, Volume 10: Guilty Hands**, W.S. Van Dyke, 31; *The Match King*, Howard Bretherton & William Keighley, 32; *The Mouthpiece*, James Flood & Elliott Nugent, 32; *Secrets of the French Police*, A. Edward Sutherland, 32; *Ever in My Heart*, Archie Mayo, 33; Warner Archive \$40.99
- Hard Labor** Marco Dutra & Juliana Rojas, Braz., 11; Kino Lorber \$29.95
- A Taste of Honey** Tony Richardson, U.K., 61; Criterion \$29.95

ON DEMAND

- Love Between the Covers** Laurie Kahn, U.S./Austral., 15; iTunes, Amazon, etc. \$3.99
- My Father's Vietnam** Soren Sorensen, 15; iTunes, Amazon, etc. \$3.99

BLU-RAY RELEASES

- John Wayne x 4: They Were Expendable**, John Ford, 45; *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, Ford, 49; *Chisum*, Andrew V. McLaglen, 70; *McQ*, John Sturges, 74; Warner Archive \$21.99 each
- Absolution** Anthony Page, U.K., 78; Kino Lorber \$29.95
- Belladonna of Sadness** Eiichi Yamamoto, Jap., 73; Cinelicious Pics \$39.99
- Buster Keaton Shorts Collection** 32 films, 17-23; Kino Lorber \$59.95
- Carnival of Souls** Herk Harvey, 62; Criterion \$39.95

HOME MOVIES

OUR GUIDE FOR THE SHUT-IN CINEPHILE



MAKING HISTORY PICK

Pioneers of African-American Cinema, Kino Lorber, \$79.95

THIS IMPRESSIVE FIVE-DISC SET GATHERS A STUNNING ARRAY OF 16 FEATURES AND more than a dozen shorts, plus fragments, excerpts, and trailers from black-cast “race” movies and other examples of African-American filmmaking from 1915 to 1946. This is, quite simply, a vital collection, which dispels any hegemonic view of early black cinema as historically important but aesthetically lacking.

Most of the films are indeed rough—rapidly made affairs produced on Poverty Row budgets. But many, like Richard Maurice’s amazing *Eleven P.M.* (28), push past such limitations and achieve clear, unique artistic visions. Shot in Detroit, Maurice’s film opens with a frame story of a journalist dreaming a modern fairy tale about a street violinist, a wayward youth, and an orphan girl. The cramped compositions, expressive angles, and odd editing rhythms imbue the film with a subtle strangeness, culminating in a bizarre supernatural ending. Maurice’s quasi-amateur modernism is an intriguing surprise, but another, firmly amateur work presents a major revelation: James and Eloyce Gist’s *Hellbound Train*, the shocker of the Kino collection. Unknown until recently, the 1930 work is a moral instructional film made by a husband-and-wife evangelical team. An allegorical train filled with sinners, conducted by the Devil (an impish, gleeful figure in a ridiculous costume), travels to the underworld. Each car represents a different class of sin (dancing, gambling, etc.). Message over craft is the watchword here, but the crudeness of the film and its frantic energy are beguiling. A very different religious film is Spencer Williams’s *The Blood of Jesus* (41)—a powerful, unqualified masterpiece. Its allegorical tale of redemption and salvation has a stateliness and simplicity that contrasts sharply with *Hellbound Train*.

The great Oscar Micheaux is represented by eight features and a short, including his three extant silent films—admirable, finely crafted works, serious in their address of big subjects (lynching, the Klan, religious hypocrisy). It’s in his sound films of the 1930s, though, where the formal aspects become of particular interest. Micheaux’s zeal to put stories on screen, declining budgets, and the complications of sound filmmaking resulted in works that are seriously wanting in technical quality, narrative coherence, and acting ability. But it’s just these limitations (of which Micheaux must have been aware) that make his films pop with vibrancy, intensity, and urgency. He was invested in exploring the complicated social constructions around class, race, skin tone, and passing, and his unintended, yet mesmerizing and confounding, deconstruction of cinema as an artifice adds a formal rigor to his themes. All of which only hints at the riches to discover in Kino’s set—or to rediscover through its uniformly outstanding restorations, qualified by the sometimes poor conditions of the surviving material. Brief video introductions and a hefty 80-page booklet provide valuable context for the work.—Patrick Friel

AUTEUR PICK *The Immortal Story*, Criterion, \$29.95

THE AGED AND DISSOLUTE MERCHANT PLAYED BY ORSON WELLES IN *The Immortal Story* may despair of tales that aren't true, but Welles, that old conjurer and fabulist, never let the truth get in the way of a good story. Running less than an hour and chiefly shot in Welles's Xanadu-like home outside Madrid (doubling for Macao), his adaptation of Isak Dinesen's parable of corruption concerns a rich man's determination to realize a sailors' legend, ensnaring in his web a poor seaman and a woman from his past (Jeanne Moreau, never better). In his reluctant color debut, Welles takes to the palette with a painter's instinct—not for nothing



is his character called “Old Master”—and Willy Kuran's deep-focus photography looks exultant in Criterion's new 4K digital transfer. As in his next and last completed feature, *F for Fake*, Welles ruminates hypnotically on the need for tall tales, and the legacies of those who live by their telling.—Steven Mears

FRENCH PICK

The Films of Maurice Pialat, Volumes 1 & 2, Cohen Film Collection, \$39.98

OF THE MANY PIALAT COLLABORATORS INTERVIEWED IN THIS SET'S EXTRAS, ONLY Isabelle Huppert goes beyond the myth of the man (sadist or masochist, but always a genius) and his method (never say action, never say cut) to identify what made him more than another naturalist filming the death of a parent or the fickle ways of teenage lotharios. As is stunningly apparent in the films in Volume 1, Pialat's secret was his sense of structure, a way of juxtaposing apparently random moments before crystallizing a film's emotion and significance in one long scene, such as the epic Sunday lunch in *Loulou*.



Perhaps this is what makes his films so lifelike: you don't really understand what they add up to until they have flashed by. The mystery deepens in *Under the Sun of Satan*, which features Gérard Depardieu as a priest teetering between madness and miracle, and is this most materialist filmmaker's only excursion into transcendence.—Nicholas Elliott

FISH-OUT-OF-WATER PICK *The Mermaid*, Sony, \$25.99

EVEN AS HIS BUDGETS HAVE SKYROCKETED, AND HIS ONCE CANTONESE-SPECIFIC humor has broadened to embrace a ravenous pan-Chinese audience, Stephen Chow remains a venerable torchbearer for Hong Kong comedy's scrappiest traditions. His latest record-breaking blockbuster slaps one nutty gag after another onto a whimsical environmentalist fable, whose indictment of corporate gigantism strikes a hilarious contrast with the film's proudly expensive F/X overload. Chow delights in satirizing China's billionaire class, finding an easy villain in a mustachioed tycoon who buys up a wildlife preserve and uses sonar technology to drive out the ocean life. Stuffing her bisected tail into yellow high tops, a puckerfaced mermaid (Jelly Lin) goes undercover to avenge her endangered community, but ends up falling for her target



over a Cantopop duet and a dinner of roast chicken. The creaky narrative keeps our eyes on the onslaught of gaudy visual delights, the best of which achieve Chow's trademark balance of crowd-pleasing likability and devil-may-care abandon.—Andrew Chan

Crimes of Passion Ken Russell, 84; Arrow Video \$39.95

Cuba Richard Lester, 79; Kino Lorber \$29.95

Deadline - U.S.A. Richard Brooks, 52; Kino Lorber \$29.95

Destiny Fritz Lang, Ger., 21; Kino Lorber \$29.95

Five Miles to Midnight Anatole Litvak, Fr./It, 62; Kino Lorber \$29.95

Gun the Man Down Andrew V. McLaglen, 56; Olive Films \$29.95

Hardcore Paul Schrader, 79; Twilight Time \$29.95

The In-Laws Arthur Hiller, 79; Criterion \$39.95

McCabe & Mrs. Miller Altman, 71; Criterion \$39.95

Midnight Run Martin Brest, 88; Shout! Factory \$34.95

The New World Terrence Malick, U.S./U.K., 05; Criterion \$39.95

Night and Fog Alain Resnais, Fr., 55; Criterion \$39.95

The Ox-Bow Incident William A. Wellman, 43; Kino Lorber \$29.95

The Pride and the Passion Stanley Kramer, 57; Olive Films \$29.95

Session 9 Brad Anderson, 01; Shout! Factory \$27.99

Theatre of Blood Douglas Hickox, U.K., 73; Twilight Time \$29.95

Van Gogh Maurice Pialat, Fr., 91; Cohen Media \$49.98

Victor/Victoria Blake Edwards, U.S./U.K., 82; Warner Archive \$21.99

Where's Poppa? Carl Reiner, 70; Kino Lorber \$29.95

Whoever Slew Auntie Roo? Curtis Harrington, U.K., 72; Kino Lorber \$29.95

Wild in the Streets Barry Shear, 68; Olive Films \$29.95

Woman in the Dunes Hiroshi Teshigahara, Jap., 64; Criterion \$39.95

CULT CORNER

Female Prisoner Scorpion: The Complete Collection:

Female Prisoner #701: Scorpion, Shunya Ito, Jap., 72;

Female Prisoner Scorpion: Jailhouse, 41, Ito, Jap., 72;

Female Prisoner Scorpion: Beast Stable, Ito, Jap., 73;

Female Prisoner Scorpion: #701's Grudge Song, Yasuharu Hasebe, Jap. 73; Arrow Video \$124.95 box set

HOT DOCS

Crazy About Tiffany's Matthew Miele, 16; FilmRise \$19.95

Elstree 1976 John Spira, U.K., 15; MVD Entertainment Group \$19.95

The First Monday in May Andrew Rossi, 16; Magnolia \$26.98

Hand Gestures Francesco Clerici, It., 15; Kino Lorber \$29.95

Ingrid Bergman: In Her Own Words Stig Björkman, Swe., 15; Criterion \$29.95

Jia Zhangke, A Guy from Fenyang Walter Salles, Braz./Fr., 14; Kino Lorber \$29.95

King Georges Erika Frankel, 15; IFC \$24.98

The Professor: Tai Chi's Journey West Barry Strugatz, 16; First Run \$24.95

The Russian Woodpecker Chad Gracia, Ukr./U.K./Russ., 15; Kino Lorber \$24.95

Spring & Arnaud Marcia Connolly & Katherine Knight, Can./Fr., 15; First Run \$24.95

Weight Andrew Filippone Jr., 16; First Runs \$24.95

The Winding Stream Beth Harrington, 14; Virgil Films \$19.99

Women He's Undressed Gillian Armstrong, Austral., 15; Wolfe Video \$24.95

OF INTEREST

Robert Taylor x 3: *Remember?*, Norman Z. McLeod, 39; *Song of Russia*, Gregory Ratoff, 44; *Times Square Lady*, George B. Seitz, 35; Warner Archive \$21.99 each
600 Miles Gabriel Ripstein, Mex./U.S., 15; Lionsgate \$19.98

92 in the Shade Thomas McGuane, U.S./U.K., 75; Kino Lorber \$19.95

Anesthesia Tim Blake Nelson, 15; IFC \$24.98

April and the Extraordinary World Christian Desmares & Franck Ekinci, Fr./Belg./Can., 15; Universal \$29.98

L'attesa Piero Messina, It./Fr., 15; Oscilloscope \$34.99

Baskin Can Evrenol, Turk./U.S., 15; Raven Banner \$19.99

Bite Chas Archibald, Can., 15; Shout! Factory \$14.98

Boy & the World Alê Abreu, Braz., 13; Universal \$34.98

Bridgend Jeppe Rønde, Den., 15; KimStim \$29.99

The Bronze Bryan Buckley, 15; Sony \$19.99

Der Bunker Nikias Chryssos, Ger., 15; Artsploitation \$24.99

By the Sea Angelina Jolie, U.S./Fr., 15; Universal \$29.98

The Dark Horse James Napier Robertson, N.Z., 14; Broad Green \$26.99

The Dog Lover Alex Ranarivelo, 16; Sony \$19.99

The Dresser Richard Eyre, U.K., 15; Anchor Bay \$24.98

Elvis & Nixon Liza Johnson, 16; Sony \$25.99

Everybody Wants Some!! Richard Linklater, 16; Paramount \$29.99

Eye in the Sky Gavin Hood, U.K., 15; Universal \$29.98

Gorilla Bathes at Noon Dusan Makavejev, Yug./Ger., 93; Facets \$29.95

Green Room Jeremy Saulnier, 15; Lionsgate \$19.98

Guernica Koldo Serra, Sp., 16; Sony \$19.99

Hardcore Henry Ilya Naishuller, Russ./U.S., 15; Universal \$29.98

High-Rise Ben Wheatley, U.K./Belg., 15; Magnolia \$26.98

Holidays Anthony Scott Burns, Kevin Kölsch, Nicholas McCarthy, Adam Egypt Mortimer, Ellen Reid, Gary Shore, Kevin Smith, Sarah Adina Smith, Scott Stewart & Dennis Widmyer, 16; Vertical \$19.99

FASCIST PICK *Gold*, Kino Classics, \$29.95

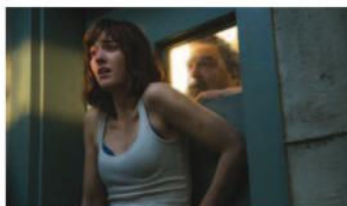
NAZI ALCHEMY! RELEASED IN 1934, CONTEMPORANEOUS WITH THE RISE OF National Socialism, this forgotten UFA “epic sound film” by Karl Hartl picks up where émigré Fritz Lang left off by co-opting rafts of futuro-expressionist *Mabuse* and *Metropolis* imagery for a tale about atomic physicists attempting to perfect a vast reactor that transforms lead into gold. The espionage gets personal: Hans Albers—hand-picked by Goebbels to play Baron Munchausen in 1943—is the vengeance-minded scientist looking to sabotage the experiment, courted by über-vamp Brigitte Helm as a mega-industrialist's rebellious daughter. The persistent German jones for medieval myth (like alchemy) in a modern context is a given, as is the fact that no one seems concerned



enough that an unending supply of gold would sink the world economy. The final Langian flood-destruction of the massive sets comes as an inevitability—spectacular enough for Roger Corman to reuse the sequence almost 20 years later in *The Magnetic Monster* (53). A megadose of fascist sci-fi glamour.—*Michael Atkinson*

CLAUSTROPHOBIC PICK *10 Cloverfield Lane*, Paramount, \$16.99

As *10 Cloverfield Lane* OPENS, MICHELLE (MARY ELIZABETH WINSTEAD), FRESH OFF a bad breakup, hits the road and summarily gets hit by a pickup truck. After regaining consciousness and finding herself in a grim cell, hooked up to an IV and chained to the wall, Michelle seems to think, understandably, that she has awoken into the latest torture porn. Things aren't what they seem, though, in Dan Trachtenberg's taut suspense-horror hybrid, an oblique spin-off of producer J.J. Abrams's 2008 *Cloverfield*. Her captor, played by John Goodman in alternately avuncular/menacing *Barton Fink* mode, insists that he has saved her life from a mysterious, apocalyptic chemical attack, and that little remains of the world outside the heavily locked-down



bunker. Trachtenberg keeps things moving even while the film hovers in a state of suspended terror, leaving us to continually wonder if the enemy comes from within or without. Ambiguity reigns—at least until a fairly direct final grace note, underlining the film's essential anti-isolationist stance.—*Michael Koresky*

ODD COUPLE PICK *Five Miles to Midnight*, Kino Classics, \$29.95

THOUGH THEY'D ALREADY PLAYED LOVERS IN *Desire Under the Elms*, ANTHONY Perkins and Sophia Loren look a queer couple here, a fact written into Anatole Litvak's French-Italian-American co-production. She's all Mediterranean runway elegance; he's a jutting-shouldered nail chewer devious enough to fake a plane crash death, only to rudely hide out in his wife's apartment until he can collect a life insurance payout. Typical of his eclectic career, Litvak situates his film on some indeterminate point between thriller and drama, livening it up with a knockout credit sequence tracking legs in the Paris rain, scored to vigorous jazz by Mikis Theodorakis. But the action is largely apartment-bound,



and while Loren bags the numerous close-ups, it's Perkins (always freshly revelatory in his non-*Psycho* roles) who pulls from his toy box full of acting business in every scene, especially when chatting up a visiting kitty (“Has the price of catnip gone up again?”). Everyone's amusingly despicable, and the denouement's a sadistic delight.—*Justin Stewart*

ANIMATION PICK *Fantastic Planet*, Criterion, \$39.95

RIGHT FROM THE OPENING CREDITS, ALAIN GORAGUER'S TRIPPY SCORE SETS AN otherworldly tone for René Laloux and Roland Topor's animated 1973 cult classic *Fantastic Planet*. In the unsettling first scene, a woman cradling an infant in her arms runs off in terror. The big reveal is that they are little more than insects (known as Oms) in the eyes of the planet's giant blue beings (Draags), who are as likely to keep the Oms as pets as they are to exterminate them, or accidentally kill them (as happens to the mother when some young Draags play rough). While



Topor's animation is relatively simple, his surreal character and background designs are elegant to the point of being cool and enhance the dispassionate manner in which this fable on the dangers of absolute power unfolds. Criterion's edition features a beautiful 2K restoration and the welcome Laloux/Topor shorts *Dead Times* (65) and *The Snails* (66).—David Filipi

URGENT CARE PICK *A Monster with a Thousand Heads*, Music Box, \$29.95

THE MONSTER IN QUESTION IS MEXICO'S BUREAUCRACY-ADDLED HEALTH CARE system, a formidably guarded corporate beast apparently designed to sabotage those most in need of its services. In director Rodrigo Plá's clipped adaptation of Laura Santullo's novel, business as usual prompts an act of reckless vigilantism. With her cancer-stricken husband's condition rapidly degenerating due to lack of access to an experimental drug, Sonia determines to secure better treatment at gunpoint, providing a provocative and involving platform for *Monster's* polemic. Which is not the same as plausible: seemingly sensible Sonia's gambit is fundamentally senseless, while the film's steady escalation of violence feels somewhat artificial. One could



imagine, say, Sam Fuller pulling off such pugna-cious melodrama; Plá is, by contrast, an inveterately discreet filmmaker, tempering Santullo's narrative with incongruous sobriety. But see *Monster* anyway for its immersive performances, its wide-ranging tour of Mexico City, and the urgency of its argument.—José Teodoro

CLASSIC HOLLYWOOD PICK *The King and Four Queens*, Olive Films, \$29.95

MIDDLE-AGED CLARK GABLE PLAYS THE PROVERBIAL ROOSTER IN A WILD West henhouse, a bachelor drifter who throws in with a tough ol' gal (Jo Van Fleet, almost 15 years Gable's junior) who runs her Utah backwater like a fortress fiefdom. She lords over a quartet of young, thirsty maybe-widows eager to have a strapping stud around the house; Gable can't turn around without tripping over a lingerie-clad cutie or a clumsy double entendre. While a total bagatelle, *The King and Four Queens* holds interest as a prototype to more fully realized films—most notably *The Beguiled* (71) in its tense ménage setup and *Wild River* (60) in



its use of Van Fleet as a frontier potentate—and shows director Raoul Walsh and Gable effortlessly coasting on the fumes of their talents (particularly in a charming dance sequence), while composer Alex North and DP Lucien Ballard, working in CinemaScope and DeLuxe Color, are near the peak of theirs.—Nick Pinkerton

A Hologram for the King Tom Tykwer, U.K./Fr./Ger./U.S./Mex., 16; Lionsgate \$19.98

Home from Home: Chronicle of a Vision Edgar Reitz, Ger./Fr., 13; Corinth Films \$32.99

The Invitation Karyn Kusama, 15; Drafthouse \$34.95

I Saw the Light Marc Abraham, 15; Sony \$25.99

Jack of the Red Hearts Janet Grillo, 15; ARC Entertainment \$19.99

The King and Four Queens Raoul Walsh, 56; Olive Films \$29.95

La Jaula de oro Diego Quemada-Díez, Mex., 13; Sol y Luna \$24.95

Last Days in the Desert Rodrigo García, 15; Broad Green \$26.99

The Last Diamond Eric Barbier, Fr./Lux./Belg., 14; Cohen Media \$24.98

The Lobster Yorgos Lanthimos, Gr./Ire./Neth./U.K./Fr., 15; Lionsgate \$19.98

Louder Than Bombs Joachim Trier, Nor./Fr./Den./U.S., 15; Sony \$19.99

Marguerite Xavier Giannoli, Fr./Czech Rep./Belg., 15; Cohen Media \$29.98

Marguerite & Julien Valérie Donzelli, Fr., 15; MPI \$24.98

The Mermaid Stephen Chow, China, 16; Sony \$25.99

Miles Ahead Don Cheadle, 15; Sony \$25.99

A Monster with a Thousand Heads Rodrigo Plá, Mex., 15; Music Box \$29.95

Only Yesterday Isao Takahata, Jap., 91; Universal \$39.98

Road Games Abner Pastoll, U.K./Fr., 15; Shout! Factory \$29.99

Sea Fog Shim Sung-bo, S. Kor., 14; Film Movement \$24.95

Sing Street John Carney, Ire./U.K./U.S., 16; Starz/Anchor Bay \$29.98

Sworn Virgin Laura Bispuri, It./Switz./Ger./Alb./Kos./Fr., 15; Strand \$27.99

Tell Me That You Love Me, Junie Moon Otto Preminger, 70; Olive Films \$24.95

Toyen Jan Nemec, Czech. Rep./Fr., 05; Facets \$29.95

Tricked Paul Verhoeven, Neth., 12; Kino Lorber \$29.95

We Monsters Sebastian Ko, Ger., 15; First Run \$19.99

Zootopia Byron Howard, Rich Moore & Jared Bush, 16; Disney \$29.99

PRIME-TIME

Ash vs Evil Dead season 1, 10 eps., 15-16; Starz/Anchor Bay \$39.98

The Bureau season 1, 10 eps., Fr., 16; Kino Lorber \$49.95

Jack Irish season 1, 6 eps., Austral., 16; Acorn Media \$39.99

The Knick season 2, 10 eps., 15; HBO \$24.98

Narcos season 1, 10 eps., 15; Lionsgate \$29.99

The Spoils Before Dying 6 eps., 15; IFC \$24.98

The Walking Dead season 6, 16 eps., 15-16; Anchor Bay \$69.98

See Me, Feel Me

A full-contact secret history of a great Briton

Talking About Ken Russell

By Paul Sutton Buffalo Books, \$125

BEARING CLOSER RESEMBLANCE TO A FAMILY BIBLE THAN A director monograph, Paul Sutton's tome (expanded by 40,000 words from the sold-out 500-copy first edition published last September) is a fascinating exploration of Ken Russell's oeuvre, the inner workings of the BBC, censorship, cinematic craft, and much more. Despite its heft, Sutton has "limited" his scope to film, television, novels, and photographic work for which Russell or his collaborators did on-record interviews (either previously published or directly with him), supplemented by letters and other archival materials. The array of voices is truly dazzling, from Mercedes Quadros, the actress (then only 10) in his 1958 short *Amelia and the Angel*; to Billy Williams, cinematographer for *Billion Dollar Brain*, *The Rainbow*, and *Women in Love*; to production designers, choreographers, producers, special-effects coordinators, script supervisors, costume designers, and family members (both Russell's and his crews').

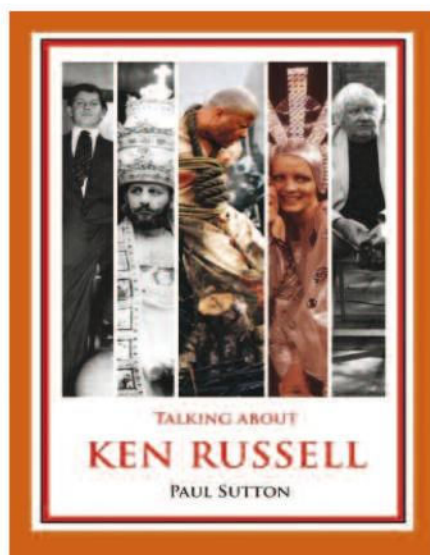
The book eschews high design; each person's account is broken up into two columns, regardless of length, with the vast majority not even including the interviewer's questions or prompts. (Correspondence and reviews are either reproduced in single-column lines of type or as scans; even e-mails get this treatment.) The book also incorporates DVD screengrabs of crucial scenes (although the ones accompanying 1993's *Inside Victor Lewis-Smith* seem to be from a bootleg AVI copy of a VHS), set photos, official stills, and advertising materials from around the world. As such, there's something zine-like about the book, with one voice flowing into the next to create a not-always-glamorous portrait of ye olde British film industry. Every statement inevitably offers a taste of Russell's personality, but also some serious technical insights into how these films, usually with tiny budgets and short shooting schedules, were made. More often than not they offer both, such as when Glenda Jackson, after lamenting Russell's inability to give substantial notes to his actors, offers: "Sometimes he over-eggs the

pudding because the script isn't sufficient bedrock for him." Hugh Grant's account of Russell's direction on *The Lair of the White Worm* after "quite a 'French' lunch" is also gold.

Though the director's most (in)famous works—*The Devils*, *Tommy*, *Lisztomania*, *The Music Lovers*, etc.—are more exhaustively covered, there are plenty of juicy tidbits about even the smaller films that should prove valuable to any non-Russellmaniacs out there. The account of *Journey into a Lost World*, a black-and-white documentary Russell made for the BBC in 1960 in which poet John Betjeman gives a tour of the former sites of great exhibitions (the Crystal Palace, Alexander Palace) in London, leads into an anecdote by silent-film historian Kevin Brownlow about the difficulty of viewing early cinema, particularly Soviet film, in the '50s. Russell was a preeminent student of silent cinema's techniques—aside from the obvious cases of *Tommy* (a musical film sans spoken dialogue) and *Valentino* (set in the world of pre-Code Hollywood), his use of faces, circle motifs, manic energy, montages, and fanciful visual flourishes that run throughout his filmography are clear extensions of the pioneering works of Dziga Vertov, D.W. Griffith, and Busby Berkeley. (It's also interesting to note the way his conversion to Catholicism invigorated and guided his work, recalling another great English stylist and satirist, Evelyn Waugh.)

Sutton rarely interjects commentary, but when he does, it's always compelling. He takes great care to connect Russell's films to those that inspired them (the filmmaker was outraged by the mis-

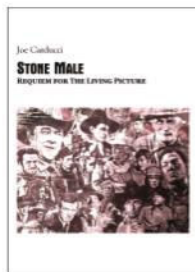
representations of Mahler in Visconti's well-received *Death in Venice*, which spurred him to make his subsequent biopic), explaining how they broke new ground (*Prokofiev*, Russell's second film on a composer, used actors to stage certain moments due to a dearth of extant photographs, a revolutionary act in the by-the-numbers BBC documentary department), and making convincing cases about when he's been ripped off (the great Stan K. used the same movement of "Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta" and identical framing of a man staring off into the distance while experiencing visions in *The Shining* as Russell did in a scene of his 1964 *Bartok*). Russell repeatedly thumbed his nose at The Establishment, embracing his status as the enfant terrible of British cinema—very often to his disadvantage. (His final batch of micro-budget independently made films, all shot on DV—sometimes in his backyard—are no less imaginative than his 1970s output.) Sutton's thorough labor of love shows the vitality of Russell's work, and how integral this polarizing figure is to the history of the medium. □



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Stone Male: Requiem for the Living Picture

By Joe Carducci Redoubt Press, \$29.95



In the introduction to *Stone Male*, Joe Carducci mentions a handful of film actresses who embody a certain unstudied quality that he admires before noting that “this book is not about them.” So what is it about? Well, as the joke goes, it’s about 400 pages of closely spaced, heavily illustrated text. It’s about Francis Ford, his baby brother John, and the westward migration of the movies. It’s about a particularly American type of screen acting—“untheatrical embodied drama”—that, in Carducci’s estimation, slipped into pictures by way of the second unit, through real-life cowboy/stuntman/performers (Richard Farnsworth, Ben Johnson) or the actors who studied them (most notably, “Duke” Wayne). For a goodly piece of its length, it’s about Italian Futurism, its legacy in Russian cinema, and the tamping of free creative spirit that renders even the best of Soviet pictures, in Carducci’s estimation, “totems of a slave state.” It’s also about the most fun I’ve had with a film book in about a million years.

Carducci, once an integral player at the pioneering hardcore punk label SST, now lives and writes in Wyoming, and he wears his status as an outsider removed from the “Culturati” as a badge of honor. He was born in 1955, but he doesn’t have any truck with boomers, and a large part of his 1991 opus *Rock and the Pop Narcotic* was dedicated to dismantling certain recurring political pieties that obscured the discussion of rock as an actual musical form. Appearing a quarter-century later, *Stone Male* may be taken as the second part of Carducci’s epic treatise toward an aesthetics of American exceptionalism. The author seems to boast at one point of having no editor, and this is entirely evident, but then it’s also evident in much published “film criticism” that lacks any of the merits of Carducci’s manifesto: burrowed-in research, marrow-deep conviction, heedless war-whoop tirades, etc. Carducci counts Manny Farber among his (few) critical heroes, and in an era marked by extreme, mannerly, pussyfooting self-consciousness, he has managed to produce a genuinely untamed, totally termitic work. —Nick Pinkerton

Cult Cinema: An Arrow Video Companion

Edited by Anthony Nield Arrow Films, \$69.95



This compilation of essays included in Arrow Video UK’s DVD releases—plus a smaller selection of new writings—is much like the 7-year-old company’s products themselves: limited-edition, eye-catchingly designed, highly collectible, and, in some cases, more grand in presentation than the content itself may seem to warrant. And that’s not an insult. Arrow Video is celebrated for bringing to British—and, more recently, American—audiences the weird, the violent, and the rare; the underbelly of cinema, of sorts. And the accompanying pieces serve as evidence that certain lower-brow titles (*Battle Royale*, *The ‘Burbs*), filmmakers (Lloyd Kaufman, George A. Romero) and actors (Boris Karloff, Pam Grier), as well as fun subgenres (Canuxploitation, Christmas Horror), are just as worthy of the royal treatment as the critically acclaimed art-house

cinema and directors championed by the likes of The Criterion Collection.

Stephen Thrower’s assertion—from his irresistible study of *Zombie Flesh Eaters*—that horror audiences are mostly male is debatable, but judging from this book, the statement is alarmingly true in terms of writers specializing in genre cinema. Of 25 contributors featured within nearly 250 pages, only one of them is a woman (Maitland McDonagh, whose appreciation of *Dressed to Kill* is a standout). But putting that sad statistic—plus the lack of a good proofreader—aside, Arrow Video’s output is, for a select group, indispensable. This book is for those who’d be excited to learn little facts like that Dario Argento chose to shoot *Deep Red* in Turin because it has more practicing Satanists than any other European city (according to Alan Jones’s fine assessment of the film), or have the desire to take a lively stroll through the history of the Poe-Corman-Price collaborations (with Tim Lucas) or the very beginnings of David Cronenberg’s career (surveyed by Caelum Vatnsdal). And it’s for those who are, like the author of the book’s introduction, director Ben Wheatley, devotees of the dark side, and whose childhoods and film knowledge are greatly indebted to the depths of cult cinema. —Laura Kern

Flare Out: Aesthetics 1966-2016

By Peter Gidal, edited by Mark Webber and Peter Gidal The Visible Press, £18



British filmmaker and theorist Peter Gidal’s notion of Structural/Materialist film, a radical formulation predicated upon a holistic sense of the material essence of cinema, represents not simply a philosophical base from which the artist continues to work but an aesthetic worldview informed by the formal properties of the medium itself. The 1975 essay in which Gidal detailed these concepts, “Theory and Definition of Structural/Materialist Film,” is the centerpiece of Visible Press’s new collection, the first anthology of Gidal’s many writings from the past half-century.

A principal member of the London Film-Maker’s Co-operative and a staunch advocate for the production, exhibition, and critical consideration of avant-garde filmmaking, Gidal has spent decades analyzing and hypothesizing the material nature of various visual mediums. His provocative conception of a “non-illusionist” and dialectical practice places him in the lineage of such foundational filmmakers/thinkers as Gregory J. Markopoulos, whose own philosophy of “film as film” Gidal implicitly references in his best-known text (the Visible Press recently collated a similar collection of Markopoulos’s writings under that same name). These theories are borne out in the early Gidal films *Key* (68) and *Room Film* 1973 (73), wherein the physical constituents of the celluloid frame are brought into direct dialogue with the pro-filmic image.

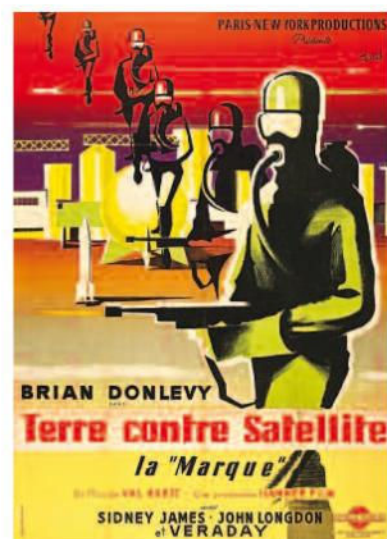
Gidal extends his materialist credo across many subjects, applying it to both the abstract paintings of Thérèse Oulton and Gerhard Richter, and the writings and dramaturgical constructions of Samuel Beckett—locating in each an ideology of non-representational integrity. Indeed, much of the book, which is comprised of texts and letters from magazines, journals, and conference papers, doesn’t deal directly with film, though the concepts can just as easily be applied to cinema. Gidal’s most frequent filmic reference point is Andy Warhol, whose art and films are proffered as Structural/Materialist totems. As to the extent of the conceit’s utility within Gidal’s own wide-ranging discipline, one need only to consult his prose, which is as dense, complex, and harmonically composed as any the field has produced. —Jordan Cronk



1



2



3

Clément Hurel

1. Les Louves

aka **Demoniac**
Luis Saslavsky,
France, 1957.

2. Voulez-vous danser avec moi?

aka **Come Dance with Me!**
Michel Boisrond,
France/Italy, 1959.

3. Quatermass II

Val Guest, U.K., 1957.

IN HIS 40 YEARS AS A POSTER ARTIST, Clément Hurel (1927-2008) created more than 1,000 posters, the best of which are distinguished by a striking stylization and a bold, often eccentric use of color that set him apart from his more studiously realist peers. Born in Nancy in northeastern France, Hurel was a fine-arts student at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris when a cousin who worked in film distribution suggested that he try his hand at poster design to earn some extra money. One of his earliest designs was of a glowering, green-tinted Orson Welles for *The Stranger*, made in 1946 when Hurel was only 19. He soon became so sought-after that he reluctantly had to drop out of school. Throughout the 1950s and '60s he worked tirelessly, producing a poster per week on average. A fervent perfectionist, he was always self-employed and, unusual among his contemporaries, nearly always did his own title and type treatments. His daughter Nancy's favorite memory of his career is that in 1959 Brigitte Bardot posed for Hurel for *Voulez-vous danser avec moi?*, probably the only time he didn't work from photographs. (His voluptuous rendering of Bardot went on to be copied for the U.S. and U.K. campaigns.) In 1960, he created the two very different original French posters for *Breathless*: one colorful and cartoony, the other—the better known—an artfully cut out black-and-white photograph of Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg that pointed the way toward a new style. In the '70s, as tastes and techniques changed, Hurel made fewer posters and worked instead in architecture and interior design. He retired in 1987 at the age of 60, with the French campaign for *Once Upon a Time in America* being one of his final triumphs.

ADRIAN CURRY writes about movie posters for *mubi.com* and is the design director for *Zeitgeist Films*. Many thanks to Nancy Caroline Gallois (née Hurel).

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**IN THEATERS &
ON DEMAND JULY 15**



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AFI Fest

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With Michael Kenneth Williams

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**IN THEATERS &
ON DEMAND JULY 29**



Shelley

Directed by Ali Abbasi

With Ellen Dorrit Petersen, Cosmina Stratan

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Berlin International Film Festival

**IN THEATERS &
ON DEMAND JULY 29**



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With Michael Shannon, Rachel Weisz, Kathy Bates

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Sundance Film Festival

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